

INTERZONE



25TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

BLOOD FOR INK: HAL DUNCAN

talks about *The Book Of All Hours* plus related new story
interviews, art, news, reviews and more stories by

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

M. JOHN HARRISON

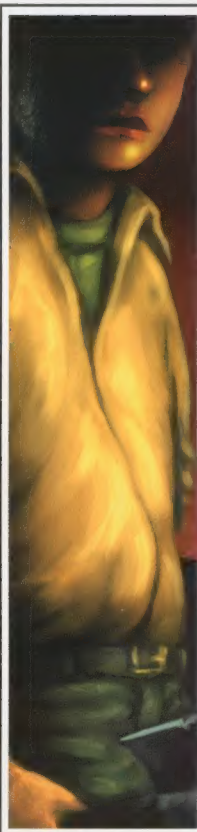
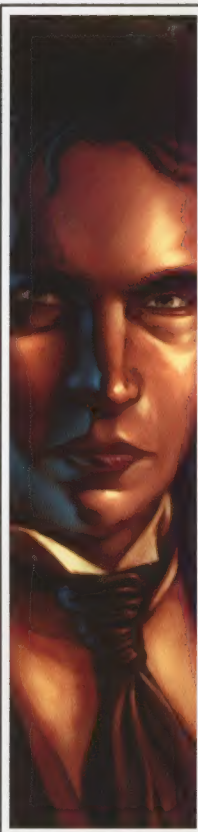
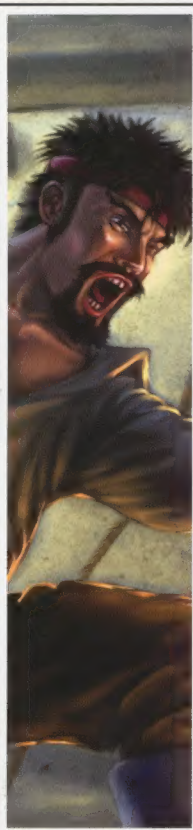
GWYNETH JONES

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JAMIE BARRAS



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illustrator: Richard Marchand
richardmarchand.com

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blackengine.co.uk

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pikzel.co.uk

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illustrator: Pamela H
pamelina.com

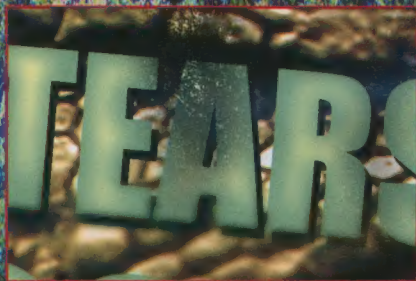
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25!

Andy Hedgecock: I bought my first copy of *Interzone* while I was holed up in a hotel in Southampton sometime in 1982. It was a bleak period for me: I was doing a job I hated but didn't have the imagination or energy to quit; and I felt the post-Punk cultural landscape was giving off a greasy stench of greed, stupidity and blandness. Fiction, music and films were becoming more predictable, less challenging and depressingly compliant with the social mainstream. At the time, David Pringle's *Interzone* was an oasis of cultural resistance and brilliant storytelling. Writers such as Ballard, Disch, M. John Harrison and Angela Carter offered prophetic insights into a decade in which conspicuous consumption became the motive engine of western society and a lack of self-knowledge became a virtual requisite for economic survival.

24 years after checking out of that hotel – and that job – I was asked to join the new editorial team of *Interzone*. I was delighted, not least because the magazine continues to resist the dire mediocrity of a publishing industry dominated by accountants. And it's still an oasis of wonderful storytelling. The editors' passionate arguments over stories reflect a deep respect for the readers – and, equally, the responses of readers to the stories and features are a constant reminder that there's an audience out there beyond the wretchedly thoughtless and spoon-fed victims of the 'Recommended by Richard and Judy' culture.

Interzone remains significant because it showcases established writers with challenging ideas. But its real value lies in its support of rising stars.

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More brief reflections on *Interzone*'s 25 years on page 4 and in the next few issues. We'd like to publish yours too, so please email them to 25@ttapress.demon.co.uk or post them to the editorial address.

Congratulations to the poll winners. Thanks for your votes and to Martin once again for organising it all. Results are on the first page of the insert.

There's more of this issue on the website: a novella by Ed Morris called 'Journey to the Center of the Earth', with a cast list that includes Walter Munk, Howard Hughes, Jacques Cousteau, Rod Serling, Jim Henson, Ursula Le Guin, Isaac Asimov...



LANGFORD AND OSCAR WILDE AT READING GAOL

Oscar Wilde was honoured on a British postage stamp in January...as one of many background figures on the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* sleeve, included in the Beatles commemoratives. Also present are William Burroughs, Aldous Huxley, Edgar Allan Poe, H.G. Wells and (least likely choice for philatelic immortality) Aleister Crowley. In other Oscar news, Christopher Priest notes that *The Prestige* was nominated for Cinematography and Set Design: 'While I might have preferred a nomination in the little-known category Best Adaptation of a Novel By Someone Living in Hastings, those two will do.'

AS OTHERS SEE US

Patrick Ness hopes that Tricia Sullivan will rise from the gutter: 'How frustrating to be a great writer who happens to work in sci-fi. For every Jeff Noon or Neal Stephenson who breaks out to wider arenas, there's a Tricia Sullivan or a Jeff

VanderMeer stuck on the shelves in that bit of the bookstore where most of you never wander. Hearteningly, Sullivan may be nearing escape velocity, and about time too.' (*Guardian*, 20 January)

AWARD SHORTLISTS

Clarke: Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *End of the World Blues*; M. John Harrison, *Nova Swing*; Lydia Millet, *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*; Jan Morris, *Hav*; Adam Roberts, *Gradisil*; Brian Stableford, *Streaking*. John Clute protested that two 2006 novels of note, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*, were effectively ruled ineligible because their UK publishers wouldn't cough up reading copies for the judges.

BSEA (novel category): Liz Williams, *Darkland*; Jon Courtenay Grimwood, *End of the World Blues*; Roger Levy, *Icarus*; James Morrow, *The Last Witchfinder*; M. John Harrison, *Nova Swing*.

EDITORIAL

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD

Philip K Dick (US paperback originals):

Andrea Hairston, *Mindscape*; Elizabeth Bear, *Carnival*; Chris Moriarty, *Spin Control*; Nina Kiriki Hoffman, *Catalyst*; Tony Ballantyne, *Recursion*; Mark Budz, *Idolon*; Justina Robson, *Living Next Door to the God of Love*.

AS OTHERS SEE US II

Film director Paul Verhoeven bewails his ghetto exile following the critically execrated *Showgirls* (1996): 'After that they would only let me direct science fiction, not normal films...' (*Guardian*, 12 January)

David Eddings burned down his garage and part of his office in January, by throwing a lit piece of paper into spilt petrol to learn whether the latter was inflammable. It was. (*Nevada Appeal*)

Joe R. Lansdale won the 2007 World Horror Convention Grand Master Award, voted by a record turn-out of WHC members.

AS OTHERS SEE US III

The *New York Times* discusses both book and film: '*The Children of Men* is not another of Ms James's famed detective novels, and it is not, as it has sometimes sloppily been described, science fiction. It is a trenchant analysis of politics and power that speaks urgently to this social moment, a 14-year-old work that remains surprisingly pertinent.' (28 December) In short, it is 'a story of redemption, set in England just decades in the future (the film takes place in 2027), when women have inexplicably lost the ability to become pregnant.' No nasty future speculation there!

Malcolm Wickes, UK science minister, suggested that our schools should teach science via 'a chunk of *Doctor Who* and Billie Piper' rather than boring old textbooks. (*Sunday Telegraph*, 7 January)

Margaret Atwood has warmed to her favourite example of sf: 'You can write well about giant squid that talk, and you can write poorly about giant squid that talk.' (Pacifica/KPFA radio)

AS OTHERS SEE US IV

Australia welcomes its own sf pay-tv channel: 'Sci-fi fans are strange animals. Their natural habitat is their parents' basement and their traditional pastime is watching their favourite shows on DVD. But on December 1 all this changed. Now we can watch our favourite shows on Foxtel too. That's right, my pasty-faced friends [...] So grab your Klingon costume, put up an "I believe" poster in your parents' basement and veg out. The truth is out there.' (*The Age*, 7 December)

Michael Crichton has discovered the age-old technique of taking revenge through fiction. So claims *New Republic* editor Michael Crowley, who criticized this author's rubbishing of global warming alerts in *State of Fear*. By sheer coincidence, Crichton's *Next* introduces a character called Mick Crowley who has no detectable plot function but is a political writer/reporter who like his *NR* namesake went to Yale. 'Mick', described as a dickhead and a weasel, possesses a singularly tiny penis but has nevertheless raped his two-year-old nephew. Responding on the same lofty intellectual plane, the original Michael Crowley published a response whose *New Republic* website link read: 'Michael Crichton, Jurassic Prick'. Such is the Real Literary World.

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Eyeballs in the Sky. 'It was as though his eyes were two planets that had suddenly broken free from gravity and got whirled off – victims of centrifugal force.' (R.L. Fanthorpe, *Out of the Darkness*, 1960) **Dept of Great Insights About Telephone Wires.** 'The overhead wires gave the illusion of shelter, but in fact offered no protection at all from the rain, a great big useless umbrella.' (Steven Sivell, *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, 2006)

High Invective Dept. 'The High Sister struck her across the face. Her eyes were like burning black coals. "You weak, pathetic, little twit!" she hissed.' (Steve White, *Demon's Gate*, 2004)

R.I.P.

Jayge Carr (pen-name of Margery Krueger, 1940–2006), US author of *Leviathan's Deep* (1979) and other sf novels, died on 20 December aged 66.

Yvonne De Carlo (1922–2007) Canadian-born actress who played Lily in *The Munsters* (TV 1964–66 and two spinoff films), died on 8 January. She was 84.

Richard (Dick) Eney (1932–2006), US fan active since the 1950s, who edited/published the landmark *Fancyclopedia II* (1959) and was fan guest at the 1984 Worldcon, died on 22 December following a stroke. He was 74.

John Heath-Stubbs (1918–2006), UK poet awarded the Queen's Medal in 1973, died on December 26; he was 88. His Arthurian epic 'Artorius' (1973) features numerous characters from myth – and not only the usual Celtic suspects.

Philippa Pearce (1920–2006), UK children's novelist best known for her classic timeslip fantasy *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958), died on 21 December. She was 86, and had been a popular figure at literary conferences.

Robert Anton Wilson (1932–2007), US novelist and anarchist philosopher who gloried in the tatty complexities of conspiracy theories – most famously in the *Illuminatus!* trilogy (1975), written with Robert Shea – died on 11 January. He was 74, and had been gravely ill for many months. His last weblog post ended: 'Please pardon my levity, I don't see how to take death seriously. It seems absurd.' (Fnord.)

When *Interzone* was launched in Spring 1982, the gloomier British sf pundits reckoned it would last about four issues. Ten years later, when David Pringle invited me to contribute a news column, I certainly didn't expect to be still writing 'Ansible Link' in the magazine's 25th anniversary year. This must be the Age of Miracles after all.

25 IZ



DAVID PRINGLE

I was looking through cuttings of old interviews with J.G. Ballard recently, and some of the things he said made me feel nostalgic for my days as editor of *Interzone* (1982–2004). In a fanzine called *Cypher*, in 1970, Ballard pronounced: “I have always disliked original anthologies, which generally are bogus magazines, without the hot blood that runs through a real magazine. Magazines are the best rallying points – they have immediacy and direction, and the passionate involvement of one or two people.” He was speaking a dozen years before *Interzone* existed, but yes, that’s how things felt when they were at their best – hot blood! a *real* magazine! a rallying point! immediacy and passionate involvement! For example, I think back to issue 19 (Spring 1987). It had a provocative cover by Ian Miller, it was filled with then-obscure writers, and we had the chutzpah to bill it as the ‘All New-Star Issue’. All the writers in it were new, or nearly new, in the Spring of 1987 – but, although virtual unknowns, they were stars. That issue contained strong stories by Neil Ferguson, Richard Kadrey, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, and, tucked away at the back, a debut piece by one Stephen Baxter (‘The Xeelee Flower’). *Interzone* was really rocking then! But that is twenty years in the past, and a magazine is a continuing process. You make mistakes – we made plenty of mistakes – but you go on to improve on things in the next issue, and in the one after that... As it was, we went on to publish many more ‘new stars,’ from Charles Stross to Liz Williams. Like any live magazine, *Interzone* is still a process and, much of the time, it’s still rocking.

SIR ARTHUR C. CLARKE

I send my greetings and congratulations to *Interzone* as it completes a quarter century of publication. That may be a speck of time amidst the eras that science fiction writers dabble in, but staying in business for this long is no mean accomplishment. Especially since we have seen the entire publishing and media landscape being turned upside down by advances in technology during that time. Today’s science fiction fans have a greater choice of media, formats and authors/creators than ever before. Amidst the many websites, videogames, mobile entertainments and other temptations, the old-fashioned print magazine still has its unique place. It’s no doubt a challenge to cater to those who are accustomed to instant gratification available with interactive media, but there is no substitute to reading.

I was raised on the ‘pulp’ science fiction magazines of the early Twentieth Century (remember it?), and it was in this *genre* that I acquired my writing skills. Today’s science fiction magazines continue this noble tradition, both inspiring young readers and creating

new opportunities for budding writers.

I wish *Interzone* many more years of success.

GREG EGAN

Interzone made me. Reading it, and writing for it, set up a wonderful resonance between the magazine’s editor, its readers, its other contributors and myself which amplified all the best things in my writing and helped me to identify and discard the rest. Sure, no writer should be swayed too much by other people’s tastes and fashions, and some rare geniuses might be able to raise themselves up in a vacuum, by their own bootstraps, but for me *Interzone* was the perfect place to discover what science fiction could achieve, and to clarify my own aspirations.

NEAL ASHER

I don’t know how long ago I started reading *Interzone*, but I’m guessing it wasn’t long after it was founded in 1982, and I’ve been reading it on and off ever since. I discovered excellent writers like Greg Egan, Alastair Reynolds and Stephen Baxter, but particularly memorable for me was reading ‘A Gift From the Culture’ by Ian M. Banks and thinking, *Shit, a gun that talks to its owner, this guy’s stuff has got to be for me*, whereupon I bought Banks’s *Consider Phlebas* the first time I saw it in the shops. I think my own submissions to *Interzone* started in the mid to late 1980s and, as I recollect, the rejection letters were always ‘Nearly, but not quite’ – and never particularly discouraging. I slumped it in the smaller presses then until *Interzone* bought ‘Sea of Death’ from me in 2001, which was around about the time everything really took off for me.

Congratulations *Interzone* on making it to the quarter century mark. In my experience for every year *Interzone* has been published at least one other science fiction/fantasy mag or press in Britain has crashed and burned.

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

Interzone really made all the difference for me. I didn’t know anything about the magazine – or what was going on in British SF – until our local library stocked the first *Interzone* anthology. *Interzone* had already been around for three years when that book came out, so it had already begun to establish its identity. In all honesty, I found the anthology a bit bewildering, since it contained very little of the kind of futuristic hard SF I was tending to read at the time. But some of the stories stuck in my mind (I remember being simultaneously appalled and fascinated by Michael Blumlein’s ‘Tissue Ablation and Variant Regeneration’) and I eventually took out a subscription to

25 YEARS OF INTERZONE VARIOUS



the magazine. My sub began in the summer of 1985 with issue 12, the one with Paul J. McAuley's 'Little Ilya and Spider and Box'. In hindsight, that story was one of the first pieces of unabashed trad SF that the magazine published, and I don't mean that in a pejorative sense. It served notice that maybe I could break into the magazine one day. By the end of the year I'd written my first submission, and I kept sending in material every three or four months (basically, timed around trips home from university, when I could get to bash on our old family typewriter). It was another four years before I made my first sale, although it took even longer before I became established as a regular contributor. What has *Interzone* done for me? Everything, basically. It got me a foot in the door of the SF world, helped me make contacts, all of which eventually led to book deals and a new day job. But if that makes the magazine sound like a simple means to an end, a career stepping stone, I don't feel that way about it. I still get a kick about being published in *Interzone* and I'm still *anxious* whenever I submit a story. It still means a big deal to see my name on the contents page. I'm immensely proud to have been associated with *Interzone's* first 25 years.

CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

At a time when UK publishers are pinning their fortunes on freaks and footballers, I console myself with the knowledge that the big ideas live on in *Interzone*. There's never an issue that fails to contain an original concept or way of thinking. Even the reviews reveal a level of contemplation unimaginable in our national newspapers. *Interzone's* writers and artists have an unprecedented strike-rate when it comes to taking great vaulting leaps into worlds of wonder and imagination. They say every civilisation gets the heroes it deserves, which may explain Jimmy Carr or Jeremy Clarkson, but how does it explain the level of rich talent found here? Proper editorship is the answer, a refusal to condescend to readers or bow to the demands of advertisers, and rigorous control that creates a world-class magazine of consistent quality. And the fiction's so good you want to have sex with it. You can't say that about *Woman's Weekly*.

CHRIS BECKETT

I started sending stories to *Interzone* in the late 1980s. I must have submitted at least three or four before one was accepted, but David Pringle and Lee Montgomerie used to write such encouraging rejection slips that I kept at it, gradually developing a sense of my voice as a writer as I went along. I'm very grateful for that. Being a writer of fiction is, for me, a very important part of who I am but they were the ones who first, so to speak, gave me permission to think of

myself in that way. I often wonder what would have happened if my first submissions had met with a bald no. Would I have carried on? I really don't know. Cheesy as it sounds, *Interzone* really did 'change my life' and I am sure the lives of many others. David Pringle did a great service to SF writing in this country by getting *Interzone* off the ground, as the current team is also doing by taking it on and keeping it moving forward: a thankless task in many ways, with a lot of worry and slog involved, and precious little, if anything at all, in the way of material compensation. I'm particularly grateful to Lee Montgomerie, then an assistant editor, who advocated for publication of my story 'A Matter of Survival'. This story, which described a world in which men and women lived in separate states which were more or less at war with one another, was the first piece of fiction written by me to appear in print. Given its theme, I was amused to subsequently discover that Lee had mistakenly assumed that 'Chris Beckett' was a woman. Funnily enough I had also mistakenly assumed that 'Lee Montgomerie' was a man!

Thank you *Interzone*, and all the best for the next 25 years.

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

When *Interzone* started, Malcolm Edwards, one of *Interzone's* founders, quoted me as saying it would only last three issues. He also had me saying something about a bland breakfast food I'd only dimly heard of. It was either Weetabix or Shredded Wheat. Anyway, the substance of that quotation was somewhat out of context. I'd actually said that it would only last three issues if it didn't make a policy of finding new work by new writers, the whole point of a magazine as opposed to a book. Also I wasn't entirely sure that a committee could run a magazine and in the end it was one man, David Pringle, who essentially kept *Interzone* alive. Over the past 25 years *Interzone* has published a considerable number of new writers, like Zoran Zivkovic, who have gone on to become internationally famous, as well as idiosyncratic work by older writers, such as Barrington Bayley, who would find it difficult to place their fiction anywhere else. It's that, and the features, which keep readers interested. The magazine has gone through a number of changes, edited through most of that time by the industrious and conscientious David Pringle, who eventually handed it over to the present editor and his team. In my view the magazine has never been better and, on its record, can cheerfully look forward to celebrating its half-century. I expect to join in that celebration. Congratulations!

More to come, from Ken MacLeod, Bruce Sterling, Peter F. Hamilton, Stephen Baxter, James Lovegrove, Dominic Green, Sarah Ash, Eric Brown, Paul McAuley and others

25 TV



10 DOCTOR WHO: DALEK **2005**
To resurrect the dead had to be a poisoned chalice, and many wouldn't have touched it with a bargepole. But Russell T. Davies wittily went back to the inner nutter: a paranoid schizophrenic, this time regenerated as Christopher Eccleston, who talks in earnest about aliens and time travel, and teamed him with an *EastEnders*-style Buffy.

The episode 'Dalek' written by Rob Shearman was the best (for a series that lurched effortlessly from moments of brilliance to moments of cringe-inducing crassness); a masterful concept where the doctor's deadliest foe is presented *a la* Hannibal Lecter, in captivity. Result? The BBC basked in its glory. Whoever doubted it would work? Well, actually, everyone.

9 GHOSTWATCH **1992**
I'm including this programme (written by me) not out of vanity but because I think, for a genre piece, it put a flag in the map at a certain point in TV history. My intention was to write a good ghost story for TV, yes, but also I wanted it to be a satire, a warning about who and what we trust. In the early 90s documentaries had begun to be shot like drama, dramas shot like documentaries, even CNN newscasts from the Gulf War were overlaid with music – and I wanted the audience to ask, what are they telling us? What are we watching? Is it true? Ironically, for some viewers at the time, *Ghostwatch* was.



8 EDGE OF DARKNESS **1985**
The sheer guts of Troy Kennedy-Martin's writing combined with future Bond-director Martin Campbell to produce a *tour de force* unafraid of stepping over genre boundaries: cop show, political drama, conspiracy thriller, ghost story and finally, most riskily, terrifying science fiction.

As in *Vertigo*, the mystery Bob Peck's cop has to figure out ultimately is himself: where he stands, where we all stand. Joe Don Baker is the mad-dog nuclear hero-monster to end them all, and possibly us in the process. Clapton's guitar is haunting, as well it might be: the bomb of *Edge of Darkness*'s ecological message is still ticking today.

7 RAINY DAY WOMEN **1984**
In this neglected, brilliant TV movie Charles Dance plays an army officer in 1941 sent to investigate rum talk in rural England about German spies, and gets embroiled in a taut psychological spiral born of prejudice, hysteria, misogyny, and plain old hatred of the 'other' – resembling the flavour of a medieval witch craze.

Writer David Pirie is no stranger to the motifs and devices of horror – he wrote *A Heritage of Horror*, the seminal critical work on Hammer Films – and he's on record as saying that *Rainy Day Women* was inspired by the paranoid thrillers of the 50s, in particular *Quatermass II*. Outstanding.



6 STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION **1987–1994**
Classic *Trek* blew my mind. But as I grew up the series soured for me. When I saw on TV the fresh-faced but earnest Lt Calley, responsible for the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, I couldn't help thinking 'Captain Kirk'.

The truth is, the Federation was all about Empire: America being the cops of the universe. Now, in the *actual* future, they're merely cops of the world. But hey, it's a start.

For me the standout characters were always the inhuman ones – God save us from emotions – and wouldn't we all like Mr Data in the White House? A robot programmed by others? God forbid.

5 SECOND COMING **2003**
When writer Russell T. Davies pitched this idea, TV execs must have thought he meant a comedy. "No," he said, "I'm serious. What if Jesus Christ comes back? Today."

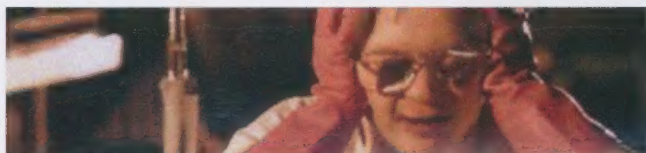
The result is a single-drama with a Spielbergian scale but none of the sentiment. This stupendously ambitious 'what-if' is by turns

25 YEARS OF TV STEPHEN VOLK



funny, moving, vivid, surprising, and cruel: because it's about human beings.

Cuddly Mark Benton makes a chilling Satan, Chris Eccleston as a pre-*Who* nutter pulls off the miraculous, and Lesley Sharp grounds it all (as she always does, brilliantly) as his girlfriend: the spaghetti scene is Harold Pinter with metaphysics.



4 RIGET (aka KINGDOM)

1994

Not to be confused with Stephen King's disappointing remake for the US called *Kingdom Hospital*, this extraordinary Danish TV series, with its ghostly ambulance, voodoo-obsessed surgeon, and Down's Syndrome savants in the boiler room was written and directed by Dogme manifesto wunderkind Lars Van Trier.

It's clear, not only here but in his movies, that Von Trier is having fun. *Breaking the Waves*, *Dogville* and *Manderlay* shock in a tongue-poking, schoolyard way, disguised only by the director's brilliance. Here in *Riget/Kingdom* he announces each episode Hitchcock-like in a tuxedo, in arch, stupid prologues. But still what follows is scary as hell.



3 THE X-FILES

1993–2002

Chris Carter's Mulder and Scully are of course *The Avengers* and *Silence of the Lambs* put in a blender: two partners who show up mysteriously and address each other by their surnames. Add subtextual romantic attraction. Add *Outer Limits* monsters. *Close Encounters* aliens. Urban legends? Popular folklore? Come on down.

I was never a massive fan of the series for this very reason. Too often it used chimeras reinvented from movies or back issues of *Fortean Times* – though there's no denying the chemistry of the laconic Duchovny and the radiant Anderson. Not to mention Eugene Toombs. Till the format went AWOL and the show overstayed its welcome.



2 TWIN PEAKS

1990–1991

At the creative helm of *Twin Peaks* was David Lynch, who Mel Brooks called "James Stewart from Mars," and the under-credited Mark Frost, formerly of *Hill Street Blues*, and therefore no slouch. The result was a clash of logic and irrationality not matched since Edgar Allan Poe wrote *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the similarly outrageous and similarly ridiculous tale of a detective and a murder.

The allure of this nasty hometown dreamland faded with familiarity and the show fired blanks as often as it scored bulls-eyes, but, let's face it, that cherry pie was damn fine.



1 ULTRAVIOLET

1998

Joe Ahearne, now slumming it with the regenerated *Doctor Who*, deserves icon status for writing and directing a vampire show with wit, intelligence, style, atmosphere and, that rare thing, a steady authorial hand. *UV* is dark and unapologetic, sucking you in and seducing you with its po-faced seriousness. Plot? As recently ripped off in the oh-so-inferior *Torchwood*, cop Jack Davenport stumbles over a secret cell, and they're forced to take him in. Bloodsuckers are all around us. It's an invisible war. Corin Redgrave played one of them and should've got a BAFTA. So why was it axed? Because the new regime at Channel Four didn't 'get' horror. Enough to make you spit. Blood.

These are Stephen Volk's unashamedly personal highs of the last 25 years of genre television. What are yours? Visit the Interzone topic on the website forum.

Stephen Volk's television credits include the notorious BBC Halloween special *Ghostwatch*, Channel Four's horror anthology *Shockers*, and ITV's multi award-winning paranormal series *Afterlife* starring Lesley Sharp and Andrew Lincoln. He's currently developing a new science fiction series with the same producers, Clerkenwell Films.



Hal Duncan's had a busy week. Last Friday he was recognised by a fan in a Glasgow pub from the photograph on the cover

of *Vellum*, his mould-breaking first novel of angels and bitmites, wireliners and sex guns, love and war and the book of everything. On Tuesday he attended the Celtic Connections festival for the launch of an album of collaborations between Scottish musicians and authors, and afterwards was interviewed by Newsnight Scotland about his involvement in the project. And tonight we're in his favourite bar, Stravaigin, to toast the launch of *Ink*, the conclusion to The Book Of All Hours duology. Hal's treating all of this with his usual mixture easy-come-easy-go realism and puppyish glee, spiced with a pinch of impish irreverence. When I proffer my newly purchased copy of *Ink* for its maker to mark, it comes back to me ten minutes later, the title page awash with green felt-tip. He's been channelling Puck again. I see that 'Ink' has been scored through and replaced with 'Jam' and there's a natty drawing of a pirate. And I know that, despite all the rocket reviews and award nominations that *Vellum* has engendered, and all of the cool opportunities that have arisen as a result, Hal's not changed a bit.

Tonight's for beer and celebration, though. Earlier, it was coffee and microphones and serious talk about writing, music, history and his ridiculously inflated sense of mission.

I bring up the subject of *Interzone* early – it's the reason we're having this chat after all, and it's been something of a talismanic publication for many of us in the Glasgow Science Fiction Writers' Circle. I ask Hal if *Interzone* had any influence on his writerly development.

"The first *Interzone* story I read was Ian Watson's 'Jingling Geordie's Hole' (1987). It was a pretty radical experience for a fifteen year old, and it's still seared in my memory. Back then *Interzone* was consistently publishing incredible stuff. When I started attending the Circle, folk were using this term 'Slipstream', and *Interzone*, to me, exemplified that. It really had a sense of expanding the boundaries of the Science Fiction and Fantasy genres. Which seems right when you think about the origins of the magazine's title. And since I read *Interzone* before I read Burroughs, I came to *Naked Lunch* with a preconception of what the city of *Interzone* signified: a territory of weird, strange fiction.

BLOOD FOR INK

GETTING SERIOUS WITH HAL DUNCAN

"An earlier influence which gave me that same feeling was Michael De Larrabeiti's *The Borribles*, whose Peter-Pan-as-working-class-oiks was as far removed from traditional fantasy in the dragons and elves sense as you could get. It's a crude, vicious story of a pack of London kids who mount a *Dirty Dozen* style mission to, essentially, assassinate Wombles. The nine year old me loved it. Hey, one of the books has a decapitation-by-shovel scene. What's not to love?"

It's a pretty anti-establishment beginning, then. And there's a strong seam of that running through Hal's novels.

"With *The Borribles* it's more of a reaction against the books that were the standard children's fare – the Swallows and Amazons, Famous Five, cosy middle class adventure stuff – not against any class itself, but the literature. I'm middle class, but I grew up in a working class housing scheme during the Thatcher years. The whole of Kilwinning was a fucking unemployment wasteland then. So, while I went to University and all of that shit, I can't disassociate from that aspect of my childhood. And the Blytons, *et al*, were set in this idyllic England of decades earlier. They were so dated. The kids in *The Borribles* had long hair and wore flared jeans and were racially integrated.

"I think what's gone into *Vellum* and *Ink* is less anti-class and more pro-underdog. Giving a voice to marginalised people – which is why we have these prominent Scots and Irish characters, for instance."

And it's these characters that give Hal the opportunity to vocalise some of his books' more forthright views. There's a full-on quality to much of the novels that

The writing I like – the writing that I want to do – is, and should be, brutally honest. No holds barred. Use your blood for ink. If you're going to do something, then you should just do it. Do it hard and follow it through

INTERVIEW BY NEIL WILLIAMSON

is reminiscent of writers like Michael Moorcock and Samuel R. Delaney.

"The writing I like – the writing that I want to do – is, and should be, brutally honest. No holds barred. Use your blood for ink. If you're going to do something, then you should just do it. Do it hard and follow it through. I love Delaney's prose, but he's written some of the wildest stuff out there. *The Mad Man*, for instance, is like...woah! It's a very hard book to read. Writers like Moorcock and Delaney don't pull punches. They don't condescend to the reader. They assume that you can keep up, and I think that's the correct attitude. If you put the brakes on to mollycoddle the reader then you run the risk of failing to meet your own ambitions. And if you're not even trying to meet your own ambitions, what's the fucking point?"

What were Hal's own ambitions when he started writing the stories that would eventually become *Vellum* and *Ink*?

"When I first came along to the Circle I produced huge screeds of nonsense, the reaction to which was: 'this is terribly creative'. You know, like the christening of that strange, black, Hungarian liqueur as Uicum on the strength of the Kaiser's

polite comment that it was 'unique'. The culture of the group worked on me though, and at one point I decided to stop faffing about and made the effort to write a proper story. It was called 'Slab City'. I sold it and then didn't sell another thing for ten years. What I did do was go away and develop the characters and tropes of Jack and Puck and the rest. And got serious about doing it."

Musical references litter the Book Of All Hours. Airborne radio jockey Don Coyote has a song for every occasion and many readers will cheer the scene in *Ink* where Jack Flash discontinues faceless corporate product from the shelves of a record store with extreme prejudice. How important is music to Hal?

"There's a description of *Vellum* as 'a superhero comic strip drawn by Picasso, written by Joyce and with a soundtrack by the Stooges'. It's glib, but the viscosity of that kind of music sums the rhythm of the book up pretty well. I love music. I think a lot of writers are secretly wannabe rock stars. I write song lyrics and poetry as well, and I have written the libretto for a gay, punk Orpheus musical. Sadly, I just have no musical talent in terms of performance.

"Good writers have an innate musicality. Look at the prose of Delaney or James Joyce or Edward Whittemore. The flow of the language is beautiful. There's an element of what they do that is deeply about the sound of the words."

This is a feature of Hal's own writing too. There's punk attitude and piratical swagger to Jack Flash in combat, a Celtic threnody to Finnan's rants, and the epilogue of *Ink* is a beautifully judged piece of lyricism that contrasts with everything that's gone

before, with a last paragraph that is more than a nod of admiration in the direction of James Joyce.

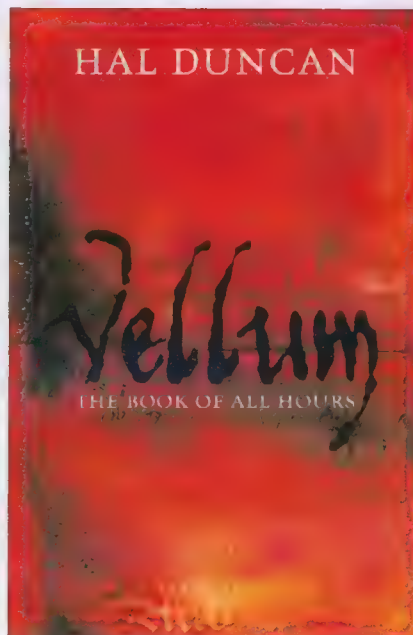
"Yes, the epilogue. The tip to Joyce is intentional, but Guy Davenport is the main inspiration there. His prose is absolutely gorgeous. He referenced pastoral idylls from Virgil and translated Sappho, those ancient forms. Without giving too much away, the Book Of All Hours can be summed up by the phrase 'people die'. It's a profound notion and I wanted to get that profundity across without doing so in a miserablist, depressive way. So, it seemed right to use the forms of idyll and elegy to finish the book. The elegiac aspect of the ending also illuminates that feeling that we all have as readers about leaving well loved characters behind at the end.

"I enjoy getting into the different voices of each of the characters and I enjoy the musicality, the playfulness of language. Writing should be ergonomic. I like wordplay and I like playing with the patterns of structure too. I've got an English degree, but most of my fascination with structure comes from SF, the likes of Burroughs and Delaney's *Dhalgren*. I'm a structure junky."

Two recent projects have allowed Hal to explore the lyrical side of his nature. *Sonnets For Orpheus* was published by Papaveria Press as a handbound chapbook. 'If You Love Me You'd Destroy Me' is a lyric set to music by rock band Aereogramme, which features on Chemikal Underground's collaborative album, *Ballads of the Book*. Which project did he enjoy more?

"They're distinct pleasures, really. I love what Aereogramme have done with the song, and they put on an awesome performance of it at the launch. On the other hand, it was someone else performing my words. I loved performing the Sonnets myself at the World Fantasy Convention because I was able to give them the punky, in your face delivery that they require, even though I was wearing a dinner suit complete with cummerbund. So both, to an extent, fulfilled that wannabe rock star."

The setting for much of the action in the Book Of All Hours is Kentigern, a twisted, Futurist, civil-war-wracked analogue of Glasgow. With its wireliners and ornithopters and its chi weapons pasted on top of the city's ageing Victorian solidity, it's a striking creation, but isn't Glasgow an unusual choice for a fantasy city?



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"I used Glasgow as a fantastical setting partly as a reaction against the peculiarly Scottish fear of being seen to be parochial, which may be attributable to the manner in which it's been portrayed by realist writers over the years. But if Joyce can do Dublin, if Moorcock can do London, why shouldn't a native of Glasgow write about their city too? It's a brilliant setting. It's so rich with history. Its industrial, political and commercial history, its position as the second city of the empire, made it perfect for the alternative Futurist empire in the Book Of All Hours. The West End, where I live, has a wonderful, cosmopolitan indie culture. For me, it's the East Village. Like Jack and Thomas, a summer afternoon with friends, passing the time of day stretched out on the grass of Kelvingrove Park, with the high edifice of Vellum's Circus behind and the sculpted victoriana of the university and art gallery buildings that are subsumed into the Rookery in front, is my ideal way to spend time."

Hal clearly has a fascination with

history, its linkages and repetitions, and he has a talent for making it come alive. What drives this interest?

"I'm not that interested in building imaginary worlds from scratch. I'm more interested in putting them together out of fragments of real world history. Even using myths, ancient texts – those are historical artefacts in their own right. It's a sort of *Scrapheap Challenge* approach, I guess. Except I'm raiding the museum instead of the scrapheap and saying, no that doesn't belong in there; that should be out in the world doing what it was intended to – striking pity and terror into the hearts of men – and if it has to be spliced together with some mad pulp narrative with exploding airships or angels in order to be brought to life again, that's better than a cosy academic reverence that boxes it off as some 'classical' whatever. Aeschylus is powerful shit. So's *Inanna's Descent*, or *The Bacchae*. But we have a tendency to treat these texts as artefacts of this strange other culture. We make them safe that way. And we do the same with history itself, I think, seal it off in a little box, study it with intellectual curiosity. We might be moved by some telling of it, a *Schindler's List* or suchlike, but even there, in a lot of cases, there's a safe distance between us, in the here and now, and them, the ones it actually happened to, over there, in the past. Even with the most brutal and honest realism you're still divorced from a 'historical' tragedy. The past is another country and all that. For most people it seems like the past is fucking Fairyland. It might as well never have happened.

"But humanity is its history; history is what we are. In the same way that a person's identity is defined by their memories, their habits. You look at history and you see everything we're capable of, good and bad, wonderful and horrifying. And that's fascinating because it's important. To me, it's probably the most important thing there is for a writer to talk about. If history is like a person's identity, then it's not just a matter of 'never forgetting' something like the Holocaust, or WWI, or the Armenian Massacre. It's that these are habitual behaviours. These are the same story happening over and over again. There's no safe distance between us and them. We are them.

"I guess that what drives my interest is that sense of history's importance. Maybe that's circular logic, but it's a sort of humanist outlook, the idea that we

have to know history to know ourselves, and we have to know ourselves so we don't just fuck it all up again. The Spanish Civil War is a big symbol to me because you have all these everymen going off to join the International Brigades, to say *nil paseran* – nothing will pass. Never forget. Never again. We're drawing a line in the fucking sand. You have the Hitlers of the world saying, 'Who now remembers the Armenians?' You have to have people saying, we fucking remember them. We do. And here's their names: Matthew Shepard; John Maclean; Paul Robeson; Lorca.

"Yes, I probably do have a ridiculously inflated sense of mission. But, it's better than being complicit by being ignorant.

"Where I hope the weird 3D time approach I've used in *The Book Of All Hours* might help make it come alive more is that it kind of boxes the reader in, I think. What I want to do is show that story taking place in the past, yes, but in the future as well, and off to the side in alternative realities, and in fantastic settings that are under your feet, so to speak, and above your head. Everywhere you fucking look that story is there. The point is to leave you thinking about the other version of the story, the one that's not being told but that must be taking place right here and now, in the silence in the centre, because the story's taking place everywhere, right?"

In *Vellum* and *Ink*, this 3D approach to history that allows the story to be told as a sort of layered, cubist mosaic has thrilled some readers and confounded others. I wonder if Hal worries that he's constructed a writerly prison from this approach? Considering that his *Interzone* story is one of a quartet of new *Book Of All Hours* novellas, is there an end in sight? And is the *Book* in danger of becoming a millstone?

"I don't think of the *Book* as a millstone so much as a foundation stone. The way I see it, you have the idea of the *Book* itself, and *Vellum* and *Ink* are built around that, like a big cathedral, this grand temple. The idea would become a millstone, I think, if I was to try and keep adding new annexes – a *Book Of All Hours* 3, 4, 5, 6, and so on, *ad nauseum* – that only ended up burying the basic story in pointless add-ons. The whole thing was only ever envisioned as four volumes, one for each season. That's done now; time to walk away. But that doesn't mean I don't want to do more work based around that idea; I do like the idea



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of exploring the mythos through stories that stand alone but interconnect. It's like going on to build a city around that big cathedral – pubs and houses, parks and docks – where there's connections in terms of tropes and characters and themes. In a lot of ways the *Interzone* story and its companion pieces are sort of an attempt to define a sanctuary wall around the *Book Of All Hours*, the temple grounds.

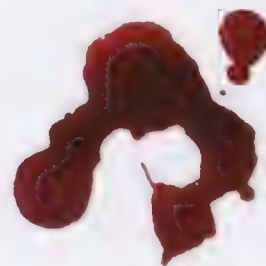
"Then you have the possibility of Jack and Puck in a story that has sod all to do with the *Book*, like a pirate story or a gentleman's club tall tale – and those are out there in the city proper, or even way out in the wilderness. But the way I see it, the 3D time idea has infinite scope, 'cause any story at all can take place in that multiverse. It may not be explicit or even relevant – there's no reason to read something like 'The Disappearance of James H____' as a *Vellum* story – but I think of it as taking place in a corner of the *Vellum*. Where the *Book* is a springboard I'm jumping off from, that visualisation

of the 'space' in which any story can take place is a mental model of the air I'm jumping into, so that's a tool I'd be crazy to discard, I think."

So, the *Book Of All Hours* is a done deal, and Hal has established his credentials as a writer of serious intent; which raises the traditional final question: what next?

"I'm just back from committing piracy on the high seas, and now I'm on my way through Hell. I've got a novella which should be done and dusted by the time this sees print. It has a Hollywood pitch of *Escape From New York* meets *Jacob's Ladder*. It's the story of a hitman, a hooker, a homo and a hobo in the ultimate prison break: busting out of Hell itself. It's pretty balls-out, action-oriented stuff, and it should be 40,000 words tops, so it may take a lot of people by surprise. I just wanted to do something as tight and pacy as the *Book Of All Hours* was big and sprawly.

"After that I'll be buckling down to the next big novel project, which is *Fur*, a retelling of the *Gilgamesh* Epic across three threads, one mythic – being a straight translation of the source text, in so far as what I do can be called 'straight translation' – one historic – set in 18th/19th Century British Columbia – and the other near-future – involving all sorts of posthuman weirdness, bioengineered fursuits and theriomorphic bodymods. It might sound a bit messed-up, and my editor has kittens whenever I describe it, jokingly, as 'Gilgamesh And The Furies', but it's actually got a lot of scope, I think, for a deeply serious work dealing with all that 'human condition' malarkey." ■



Vellum: Macmillan, 600pp, £7.99 pb

Ink: Macmillan, 615pp, £7.99 hb

Visit www.thebookofallhours.co.uk for more information, and a riddle set by the author

Hal Duncan was born in 1971, grew up in small-town Ayrshire and now lives in the West End of Glasgow. Working part-time as a computer programmer, he is a member of the Glasgow SF Writers' Circle. *Ink*, the second novel of The Book Of All Hours duology, is out now. The first, *Vellum*, is now available in paperback.



Richard Marchand was born and raised in Fort McMurray, Canada. Living there had a huge influence on his early aesthetic sensibilities as the town, while nestled in the woods, is also privy to miles of nearby manmade wasteland via the oilsands project. The contrast between natural beauty and the often enigmatic side of technology plays a large role in his work. Richard currently lives in Vancouver with his wife Catherine, and works as a freelance artist contributing to *Scientific American Magazine*, *Sony*, *Games Workshop*, *Midway Games*, *THQ*, *Microsoft*, *Fox*, *Radical Entertainment*, *Virgin Interactive*, *Relic Entertainment* and many others – including *Interzone*!

THE WHENEVER AT THE CITY'S HEART by HAL DUNCAN illustrated by RICHARD MARCHAND

One Second To Midnight

Twelve o'clock and all's hell in the city, drunken angels screaming fire-bombs into crowded taverns, sandminers rioting in the Litan Quarter, host princes and rebel reachers murdered in unending vendettas. And the Watch Tower itself playing funny buggers with the time.

Rumpled, stumpy, the old watchman ascends on the clockwork spiral of escalator, steel scales grating underfoot, gyring up into the ticks and talk of turning gears and sproinging springs, the whirl of mirrored cogs and jam of hammer-and-bell that *should* be knelling, telling time in rhyme and reason, chimes and seasons... but is not. The pendulum that stretches down the whole height of the watchtower, hung on wire as thin as a dimension, snicks and cocks and rocks this way and that still, but it seems it's marking off one second to midnight, one long second to midnight, one drawn out and stretched second to midnight, time and time again.

So, with his tools ajangle on his belt, the watchman clambles up the ringing rungs of ladders, raises a trap door overhead, and huffs himself up into the Mechanism.

Clockwork and light, a glitter of glass and brass, lenses and lasers, like a dance of candelabra, fills the vast space of the Watch Room – or the Waltz Room as he used to call it – with a temporal orrery that charts the orbits of each planet of

a boulevard, each satellite side-street in the city, turning, this one faster, this one slower, here a smooth elliptical and there a swirl of partner avenues, every road or alley following its own path through the three dimensions of the city's time but each one synchronised to the strict tick of the pendulum. Every elsewhen of the city is mapped out in miniature in this machine, this clockwork whirl of an exploded hologlyph in the tower's heart. Even the Watch Tower itself is microcosmed, a slender sentinel of stone carving its long slow circuit round the perimeter. That's why he's here.

He climbs up into the leather chair of the telescope, swivels wheels, adjusts dials and pulls levers. Mirrors and lenses snap to angles, click to tracks, and set off on their own trajectories to peer into the heart of the machine and snap reflections back – like players circling on a field, spinning to pass a ball between them – back to the eyepiece of the telescope which he looks into now.

Here in his tower, he defines the world's horizons in infinitesimals. Rumours are that at the core of his machine is something called the Hour's Eye, the hawkeye of a deus of desert river nomads, plucked and sliced, cut into halves and quarters, eighths and sixteenths, fractioned on to a myriad of minutiae. Now here and reconstructed in this tower, it's said, the Hour's Eye is an infinity of zeros,

holographic fragments each containing an image of the whole. Some say the streets follow their paths through time because it is these fragments of the Eye that bind them to the Mechanism, others that the orrery, the Hour's Eye is bound more to the city than the city's bound to it.

Either way this is the lens the watchman sees the world through.

Our own mosaic gaze studies him as we anticlockwork bitmites, all clicked snug together in a scarabesque form of devilish devising, land and fold our wings away behind. Cogs, gears and wheels turning beneath our carapace speak of a tense intensity, a high-strung need for a release to spring. We chitter, our driving mechanism an insect agitation.

—Life is a momentary matter, we say, your death inevitable, for dust thy heart, and into dust thou shall reburn.

He doesn't hear, intent upon his task. The pendulum ticks and the orrery turns, but it is still one second to midnight. Somewhere in the Mechanism there must be – he spots it – *yes!* – leaps from his seat – a cog unlocked, a tock unlocked. He crooks a screwdriver in a crack of panel to lever and twist it loose a clang. He unscrews a tiny pinwheel inside, checks the chimes and screws it back, kicks the machine. Finally that one second ticks on and, somewhere above, the hammer strikes the bell.

DOOM.



Upon The Parchment Of Their Souls

Sitting cross-legged in the centre of his strange mosaic of objects, the blind boy scratches another line into the dirt, places two scraps of cloth at one end of it, side by side. Plastic doll's heads, shards of pottery and mirror – the yard is covered in such junk now. The sandminer stands in his doorway, resting one hand on the timber frame, and watches the boy pick a rusted kettle from the pile beside him, find a place for it. It scares him. Is not right. All the...things of this mosaic, they seem to serve as symbols of a sort, conjure sensations of all kinds – sunflower-yellow, dry heat, pepper, the aroma of rosewater. He only has to glance back at the fear on his wife's face to know she feels it too, this field of memories surrounding the blind boy. It is as if he paints upon the parchment of their souls some black art of abstraction formed of glyphs which, in the proportions of their placement, in the relationships and resonances between them, utter the truth itself into reality.

Is not right. He shudders, tells the missus, *stay inside*.

The sandminer's eyes flick in saccadic movements out to temporary fixations, shifts of focus and smooth tracking shots, and everywhere the memories bloom like wildflowers – here the screams of a crowd dispersed by armoured angels, there a bird's-eye swoop of the Litan Quarter, here the stink of charred flesh, there the feast hall of the host. The scope of it all encompasses, like being engulfed in echoes, swept off in a river of sensation that might wash him all away.

The boy puts a potshard into place – pothealer's apprentice, he was, before the riot and rout that blinded him – and the sandminer feels a flash of a taste of dust, human flesh scattered by angel disruptors in the marketplace.

—Taste is the best, the boy had said, simple stamps of salt and sweet and sour and bitter, neh, like compass-points? Then...a thousand smells to taint it, all different, a big crazy code of chemicals. Is the most...symbolic sense.

The sandminer can't even read and write the linguist of the city, let alone understand what this strange child is trying to say in a script of flavours and aromas.

The angel dust flows everywhere around the symbols, and it's this as much as anything that judders the sandminer's stomach into a knot, shivers the weirdness from his spine like a dog scattering rain from

its wet fur. The bitmites are everywhere in the city at night, but the flood of them that fills the yard is not black now but a melted rainbow of oil on water, rich with tones beyond the normal spectrum. He's seen colours unknown to many – infrared and ultraviolet – through his nightshade goggles, in the dark shafts of wooden shoring and wet sands where they dig for souls out in the Hinter beyond the city. But now he sees metayellow, transorange and subgreen, greybrowns that are not dull but intraluculent. A phrase from forever ago turns in his thoughts: a terrible beauty.

—Is wrong, boy, he says.

—Is almost done, says the boy.

The sandminer sees himself now sketched into the picture, not an image as such, but rather a model of him in a space described in curves of pitch and roll and yaw of balance, muscular tensions, a space as strange to him as the sonar surfaces a bat knows or the scent-shapes of a snake. It's an echo of him grabbing the blinded boy, dragging him out of the massacre and into the safety of the side-streets – you pothealer's

machine grind. Cogs squeak and shriek. Pipes round about the watchman rattle – louder, louder – then spit spumes of vapour from abruptured valves, the episteam engenerators timed to vent their pressure with the clockwork cycle's turnings now clattering their frustration that the age of reason, the reasoning of ages, is on hold.

—Wait just a tick. Just wait a tick.

This can't be happening, *mustn't* be. The pendulum, the orrery, the bell unsynched – why, it could sink them all. He scowls. There has to be an underlying reason. He ducks steam and weaves through workings to get back into the chair, hand-cranks the telescope to point towards the glass tower at the centre of it all, the microcosm of their axis mundi, the null-point of eternity round which it all turns, the whenever at the city's heart. It stands inviolate, eternal as it has been since the unkin lords first built their crystal keep, this roost of skyscraper from which to reckon the city. Except...

He clicks through lens and lens to magnify the image. At one broken window of the

Hope is a horror in his pounding heart, a world within that is about to fall apart. He has to stall it all, give time to raise alarm

boy, neh? Come! Come or we both die! – but it's as much the memory of staggering in his inner ear, the heat of a nearby ruptor blast upon his face, as sight or sound.

The sandminer pulls himself out of the dust of a dead reacher and his shattered book, half-carried through the storm of angel vengeance, shredded souls. The boy lays a roofing slate in front of him, holds up a broken crayon, the last scrap of his junk.

—Is done, says the boy.

As the blind boy puts the final piece of his mosaic into place the sandminer sees and tastes and smells and feels and hears the – DOOM.

A Mote In The Houri's Eye

Subultrasonic, cacophonous, the second bawl of bell strikes over the city and the Mechanism shakes for all its insulation, dust raining down from the worm-eaten floor of the Bell Chamber above, to sparkle through the light show of the orrery. Which chundles to a stop.

—Ah, wait a tick, now, mutters the watchman. Wait a tick.

The gears of the great measuring

tower a black hole of a silhouette stands, fire behind it and the searchlight of a thopter sweeping over it...and all the light being swallowed. A broken window and a blackness. A mote in the Houri's Eye.

The watchman swivels his seat with whirling handle to reach out and slam free an emergency release, rotate in front of him the manual overdrive of levers, pedals and pulleys that allows a man to work the orrery under his own steam, to wind the Mechanism on a tick to see the future, if need be. Need definitely be, he thinks. He pedals and cranks. The whole contraption lurches forward a few ticks. A twirl of the telescope into focus and he sees...the glass tower crack and slip as if the weighting cosmos slammed it to the earth. He snicks another tick to find a wild kaleidoscope in its place, a cloud of weirdness so empty of time and meaning that it nearly sucks his soul into its senselessness before he snaps his eye away from the telescope.

The watchman hears the whirr of springwheel whirling, knows the sound of tension leading up to hammer's strike, the bell about to knell.

Armed with a spanner for the works, the watchman clatters up ringing rungs, fumbling and stumbling through the trap door to the Bell Chamber. Hope is a horror in his pounding heart, a world within that is about to fall apart. He has to stall it all, give time to raise alarm, let angels rise, take up arms in alarum. He drags himself up to his knees, to see the brass bell large as his own home in the Hobben Quarter, and the hammer falling.

And low, but resounding in collision, in collusion, in collapse over the city streets, aringing out across the unified Illusion Fields, across the empty havens of the Hinter's ice and sand, out over oceanic aeons of sunken cities long dissolved in the oblivion of Evenfall, and even in the dead soul deeps beyond reality's horizon, the whole vast spaceless gulf of time itself enchimes, the darkward and abysm of time cracacks, all with a boom of a big band big bang last trump big crunch, an almighty – DOOM.

A History Of Thought

The craftsman sits at his desk in the

graving was imperfect, incomplete, their pitifully fractured languages a dog's yowl of dumb pride, hunger and fear. The spirals, notches and curved swastikas carved in the spearthrower won't code it to throw true, don't inscribe will in the world. They're mere scratches on its surface. Still...

There is no date to these tools – numberings of years have little meaning here – but skulls of dustcrawlers from the same strata show an evolutionary growth-spurt. And it's this elsewhen far out into the Hinter where the first unkin, so the theory goes, stood up from mob humanity, stepped out into the Vellum.

Rolled up on the shelves in the wooden cabinet behind him, scores of old charts diagram discarded metaphors of millennia of human understanding – engrammatic programming, behaviourist conditioning, fraudian complexes, zodiacal star-signs, oriental skandas, the four humours, and so on. A tabula rasa hangs in a frame beside the cabinet, an image of an ideal mind of sorts, a blank slate, all the prejudices, tolerances, conscience, ignorance and such

forefinger, pinches the bridge of his nose. Outside the Museum-Mausoleum of the Homo Primate, far off but audible, the bell of the Watch Tower chimes a distant – DOOM.

A Glitter of Sprinkling Tinkles

The watchman feels the gantry shoogie under him, screws loosened by the resonance of the bell, as he shifts forward trying to reach the hammer's hinge. If he can jam his spanner in the right place maybe he can stop it all from going to rack and ruin. He doesn't hear the cracks creak, deafened by the bell, but looking down he sees abstractions shearing with the twist of steel. A lurch of gantry drops him to his knees and he sees sand trickle down around him, clocks with a glance that it's coming from the archways of pillars and stone dome that cap the tower. Wrack and ruin, wreck and rain. The whole metalogic forgery of the Watch Tower, grand antique keep of time, is about to come crumbling crashing down, if he can't stop it.

He looks out between two pillars at the city and the coast that curls around it, that it sprawls along in not-quite-possible topographies and geographies, the Illusion Fields, and the Hinter far out in the distance. He looks in the other direction at the centre of the city with its glass tower, and the Irin Quarter beyond, and finally the docks with their bridge-walls, stone threads of order at the very edge of everything. He looks at the silversea of heaven and ocean out past that, the swirl of an ever-turning spiral of a never-breaking wave, a great swirl of blue-back and silver-white, of what might be water or air or light or mass or something else entirely, extending and intending, falling inwards to the Deep Within or rising outwards to the Great Beyond, but reaching, reaching. If the city sits at the end of time, that vortex is what comes after.

The tower shakes. He clutches the grating of the gantry as he edges further forward. It can't happen. It *won't* happen. The city is built on rock, as sure and steadfast as a sleeper's flesh in the flood of night. Don't the stories say that the glass tower itself was built around the great mast of the ship that brought them here, over a world of wild and rolling ocean to the rock of their landing? Don't they say that when the waters drew back, and the black earth rose under them, and the stars wheeled into place around

Museum-Mausoleum of the Homo Primate, playing with a spearthrower. A polished carved intricate relic of the Bone Age denizens of the Hinter, it's a quantum leap from the rough flakes and chips of stone that went before, a leap in the dustcrawlers' wits and wisdom. Perhaps a breakdown of the barriers between the modules of the protean mind, he thinks, the social, natural and technical intelligences rewired to allow a cross-stream knowledge to take shape in complex artefacts of new materials, of *components*. A link with the origins of language, he muses, those first acts of definition, acts of making finite, binding meaning into forms that lace together, lock together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle – a sense of sense proscribed and prescribed into sentences, articulated into spatial metaphors, meanings as things that can be *grasped*.

In his schematics of the mind he pictures language as another tool, forged in a lightning flash, a sigil at the very centre of this webwork of intelligences. A graving of the Cant's mechanics, the signs and syntax that command reality. Only for some the

inscribed not by nature's pragmatic hand but by the rule and writ of culture.

It would be so much easier if that one were true.

He lays out his own working schematics of the human mind in front of him, placing paperweights – a black stone, a dustcrawler's skull, a gypsum figurine, a clay tablet – on the corners of the chart to keep it from recurling. Graved in the Cant, it reconstructs his vision as he studies it, rises out of the plane, a complex hologram sketching a series of concentric spheres and flowcharted frameworks, tracing a history of thought from bestial beginnings through to modern man.

All of those other charts are obsolete now. Now the angel has a new map of the mind with which to try and trace the root of consciousness, of free will, of the soul. This is his job. With the humans rising up in riot throughout the city, seeking to overthrow the very unkin lords who sang their world into solidity, the craftsman has the charge of finding that elusive spark of spirit...to snuff it out before it is too late.

He rubs his eyes with thumb and

the crescent sun and moon, and green-golden grain swayed in the fields, don't they say that the ship, left high and dry on the rock, was built around and swallowed up in their new settled eternity, its mast the very axis mundi of the city and the order that it symbolises? Don't they say that? The shadows of the bitmites might shape dreams around us in the aether, yes, but under the covers is a body, still and solid in its slumber, the great captain god himself, anchored by chains. It can't happen.

As if to answer him, a chain comes rattling down from above, unloosed and tumbling free, smashing through the wormy floor of the Bell Chamber. Through the hole he sees the chain swing, hit the microcosm of the glass tower, scattering it to a glitter of sprinkling tinkles.

He imagines all over the city kin and unkin falling from their beds as time and space unfurl between the rending vortex of sea and sky. He pictures blue-black waters rising in waves to meet the heavens opened above, crashing over docks and airshipyards, crashing down on neighbourhoods of tenements and temples, city centres of skyscrapers, shantytowns of shacks out on the very edges of the city. He pictures waves crashing down in silver spray of foaming moonlight, starfall glittering torrential rain on streets that sweep out to wide roads into the wilderness.

We flutter to alight on the gantry in front of him, try to comfort him.

—There is no beginning and no end, we say, no first or last events to bound this cosmos, only thresholds of reality, singularities, where the sheer immensity of minutiae tear the truth apart. And here, listen, hear the sound of the clash of symbols, the chaocophony, the end of something and the start of anything:

DOOM.

All His Forgotten Wars

In a room carved out of candlelight on wood, the soldier kneels before the dreamwhore. He holds his dogtags like a rosary and bows his head as if to pray. Then, as he looks up at her again, his eyes close slow as if to say, forgive me. Let me have a summer, he thinks, just one summer of peace, and when you must, come gather me in your arms to dance...

She touches his shoulder.

...to sing of roses in a ring, he thinks, and death.

—Stay, she says.

Death, he thinks, is a warm flower held out towards you in the hand of someone you love.

He stands and pulls his longcoat on, checks in the pocket for the little leatherbound copy of the reacher's book, the Book of All Hours. A book of prophecies and portents, madness and mathematics, it's his only connection to the man who freed him, his only real connection to this last war, this last battle that, like all such battles, can only fail even in victory.

He shakes his head. It's time to go.

.....
This is the story that he told her as they lay together: His first memory of the city is of having just arrived (though he does not remember the arrival), standing in the Strazza de Kentaurii, thinking that all his forgotten wars were over now he stood in heaven. His second memory is of kneeling before an unkin duke at the Centurian Gates, proud in the wings and armour of a guardian (back when humans could still earn admittance to the lower host). His third memory is of being sent out to watch the rabble-rousers in the markets of diplomacy

He pulls his longcoat on, checks in the pocket for the little leatherbound copy of the reacher's book, the Book of All Hours

and enformation. His fourth is of studying the paxhawkers buying truths and selling lies on the corners, at the crossroads, at the junctures where the culture of one quarter meets another, powertraders touting beliefs and ideals in the inns and taverns, coming to understand how this common currency of consensus illusion is the nearest thing humanity has to the Cant. His fifth is of a master merchant drunk and bitter: we do not even know we're slaves and beggars, pets and property, he said. His sixth is of halting in a moment of doubt as he was about to turn his ruptor on a rebel crowd, then spitting the word that strafed them all to dust. His seventh memory is of a blind man, a reacher he'd been sent to shadow, telling an uneasy crowd that in this city words are weapons, words are power, words command reality, and those who hold their reins enforce the silences of thought that wall their towers. When the angels came that day to raze the rebels with their swords of fire, he turned his own disruptor on his masters.

This is the story he told the dreamwhore of how he came to fight the good fight, stand against the raging light.

—You have a name then? she'd said.

He'd nodded, shaken his head, shrugged. A half-name in the Cant, in the language of the angels and the bitmites, graved into his forehead as he knelt at the Centurian Gates, enough to bind him but not to unleash him, enough to let him speak the Cant but not to hear it.

—Enough to track you? she'd said, closing the shutters of the windows.

—Just enough that I can't run forever. That's why I want you to whore me a dream where I'm another, just for a night. A sandminer or a soulfisher...or a dreamwhore if you want. Whore me a dream that I'm you, eh?

She'd come back to sit on the edge of the bed beside him, slide his longcoat from his shoulders.

—I'll give you a dream that'll stay with you for days, she'd said. I'm the best ungilded that there is, and I've no love for the angels.

.....
—We're all miscast or outcast to our station, says the dreamwhore now.

She runs a finger down the soldier's scar,

the rivulet of soft pink skin that ripples from grey hair to beard, the jagged flourish at his missing eye, like a weirdly inkless graving. With this and his longcoat and ruptor, she thinks, they should hardly need his half-a-name to track him, but then she hardly noticed him herself in the shadowy booth of the inn, until he called her over. Might have been sitting there for hours. She wonders if you can speak silence in the Cant, go from place to place and leave no trace by living in words and ways unspoken and unspeakable. A dreamwhore's boudoir at midnight or a tavern booth where he whispers nothing, simply drinks the beers and the beauties, seeming an old regular if anyone thinks to look. In his silence, in those spaces between words, would there be a form of freedom?

—We might keep each other well, she says. And it's wild out there. Sandminers rioting. There's talk of the host riding out in wild hunt, seeking revenge for their precious prince, poor little golden boy.

—Exactly, he says. It's time.

She doesn't know what he means, but as he opens the door, as if on cue, the bell of the Watch Tower sounds its deep and

ponderous –
DOOM.

The Breaking Of Days

The watchman scrambles along the gantry as a cog ten times the size of a cart-wheel whirls from its place and rolls, smashing through ladders and metal stairs and down into the jumbled wreckage of the tower's now teetering internal intricacies. He falls and rolls, flings himself towards the wall, across the hole crashed even wider by the cog. A great crack sunders the stone dome above, and he clutches a pillar; under its arch he should be safe, no?

He looks down onto the flagstoned plazza of the Watch Tower, the museums and mausoleums that side it, raises his gaze over the city to what should be fields of farms beyond, the firmament, and sees reality's horizon as an edge of ragged rock, the city ripped free and sliding into sky or sea.

Silver and gold as surf or sand, a liquid light swirls in waves aglitter with the scattered grains of spacetime; it roars into the gulf made by the city's sheering from

stream through these fissures from the source of time, the breaking of days. They rise straight from the core of this cosmos, tear the mantle in vast continental rifts that spew debris of folds and forces, a wash of waves and dust of particles.

The tower rumbles. The dome splits, raining stone that batters through the floor of the Bell Chamber, pounds through the Mechanism, punches through the floor below as well, and down. Through the broken brass and black below he sees the pendulum snap, the whip-end of it lash the walls as it falls, opening up yet more cracks. Near whimpering, he clings to his pillar, his tiny perch in the surviving skeleton of substructure, built to sustain the bell's weight but strained near its breaking point. He hears the clatter and crash of stairs, ladders and escalators all collapsing, knows there's no way down but with the remnants of the tower, in a crumple of stone and steel.

Above, the hammer swings wild and arrhythmic like a drunk berserker while, below, the fragments of the Hour's Eye spin free now in a microcosm of the city's

Law and places it in front of him. He flicks slowly through the pages, stopping twice to read the rule again before continuing, until he's satisfied that, in accord with all already written in the Law, this proposition is entirely right or wrong. The Law must be consistent.

Only then does he pick up his pen and turn the Law to its last page, which is, as always, blank. He meticulously copies the rule onto this page, word by word, letter by letter, without error or omission, then lays down his pen and, with one of the stamps, he marks both copies of the rule as FALSE. He curls up the paper, replaces it in its steel canister and puts the canister into the out-tube. With a hiss and a phunk, it disappears. He feels a quiet sense of satisfaction. One step closer to the Law's completion.

The blotter on the desk is covered with scribbled notes, ramifications and implications, the workings of more complex rules than this. One of these is a gleaning from the other book, the book of aphorisms.

There is only one rule, it reads, and it defines the Law in its entirety.

The lawscribe removes his glasses and rubs his eyes, tired. The book of aphorisms is an irksome thing, almost entirely metaphoric, proverbs and parables as much as aphorisms really, seditious spoutings of some imaginary mountain prophet of floods and dead gods. *Thus spoke Ziusudra*, it begins. It's revered by the human mob, this so-called Book of All Hours, reviled by the unkin host, a most pernicious piece of anarchist propaganda. But the Law must integrate all possible propositions, whether gleaned from the order of wheeling worlds in the heavens or from the disorder of whirling words in human heads. And he *does* think that he's, at last, managed to glean some sense from this mess of a text.

So he opens the Law before him again and begins to flick the pages. He barely glances at the laws already written there, knowing it all so thoroughly after an eternity as the city's legislative head. When he reaches the last page he replaces his glasses and picks up his pen. He starts to scribble over the rule written on his blotter, scoring out the end of it.

There is only one rule, and it defines.

The lawscribe has inscribed so many rules into the Law it is a highly complex thing by now; and for all that his knowledge and understanding of it has grown with his continual scrutiny and study, for all that

the fields, a foam of time churned into bubbles by the vast virtual energies of the infinitesimal. A momentary glimpse: a single sliver of causeway stretches out across the rift, a road still reaching to the fields beyond; then that too falls, the bridge buckling and disappearing down.

The city is adrift upon its rock, a myriad of singularities spiralling around it, sucked down with it as it sinks into its own event horizon, into the black hole at the end of night where logic dies and leaves only the absence of all absolutes.

The watchman looks out at the shifting sandscape of shards of light like stars and planets, galaxies and universes. He'd thought the Vellum solid, certain, can't quite grasp that he has only ever known the cool hard shell around a core event, with all these streets and furrows only gravings, scratches on that surface. A mycelia of crimson threads glow below the glitter as cracks of volcanism on an ocean floor, a web, a tapestry, of superstrings and twistors. Out of the city's silversea sparkling surround of swirl now, plumes of molten truth arise in reality's eruption,

maelstrom –
DOOM.

The Lawscribe

The lawscribe shuts the door of his office behind him, leans back against the glass-panelled wood. Bookshelves around the walls, a desk, two books upon it, one a small leatherbound volume of aphorisms, most of them entirely contradictory, the other the Law, a large tome, consistency its very *raison d'être*. Two rubber-stamps. Notepad and desk-tidy. Two vacuum tubes above the desk, one with a basket hung below.

With a hiss and a phut, a steel canister pops from the in-tube, drops into the basket. Curious, he thinks. All work should have been suspended for the duration of the lightprince's wake. Doubtless the discovery of some junior sophist cleric, he thinks, too keen for his own good. He unscrews the lid of the canister, takes a curled-up piece of paper out, spreads it flat upon his desk and takes his glasses from his breast pocket – his eyesight's worse and worse these days. He sits down to read the new rule.

After a while of thought, he opens the

he half believes he could rewrite it all from memory if it were lost – or look in a mirror and copy it from the reflection, written in the wrinkles on his face – he has come to believe the Law can never be both totally consistent and complete. He has seen the rule that says so, indeed, and written that rule into the Law. Stamped it TRUE, even though it saddened him; he has lost some of the passionate idealism he began his work with since he realised that the Law can never then be perfect, only approach perfection.

But now he looks at the blank page before him, and he sees a neatness in it, a summation that discards the relevance of all those contradictions. The others of the unkin host would cry out to see him do this – they'd say his mind has snapped, and it's quite possible it has – but the simplicity is too beautiful to deny. So he puts pen to paper and begins to write:

There is only one rule.

Then he sits back, smiles to himself, and closes the great leatherbound tome of the Law just as the Watch Tower bell rings out the city's –

DOOM

Of Ocean Wandering And Gods As Anchors

Everywhere the watchman looks, the shell of the Vellum is collapsing back into the core in sinks of energy, or cooling – stilling, chilling – to wastelands of empty entropy. He tries to tell himself that past the scope of all, beyond reality's horizon, the cosmos could be vast and curved, that even now the metaphisiques of other universes might be carving their own mark upon it, that this Vellum crumbling under and around them could be just one little island of an archipelago afloat upon the chaosphere, other firmaments emerging even as theirs falls.

Might the city sail around the cosmos to another settlement of time and space? Might this, indeed, be how they first arrived here in this afterworld, the source of those strange stories told in taverns on the docks, stories of ocean wandering and gods as anchors.

But that imagination gives him little comfort. The stone walls of the tower are falling, taking most of the workings with them as they rumble down to rubble below. Under him grilled gentries and sproinged springs of spiral stairway hang all broken down the tower's height, fragments of helix

locked into a wire-frame cylinder of girders. It is the last of days, he's trapped, and he has failed his task, the bell still tolling and the orrery still spinning – neither now, though, bound to the tick-tock of measured time.

The glassy glittering waltz of light that is the Houri's Eye swirls out beyond the tower's confines now, unbound by tracks and trails, its swirl ever-expanding.

We alight on the telescope which rattles loosely as we land, the inner tube come off its threads and sliding up and down with every tilt of it. From his cold perch, back against the pillar, buffeted by winds, the watchman looks at us, or at the scope, or at the seat perhaps, which has somehow survived the rain of stone around it. Too far to leap, too near to not consider it, tilted precariously but clearly snagged-up in a tangle of brass, it sits there empty, with the telescope still pointed at the centre of the orrery, looking into the whenever at the city's heart. There's a sudden creak, a slant of a gantry, and we flutter up into the air just as the scope unbalances, swings with enough momentum to unthread a

form a fine figure of a man in the clashing chiaroscuro of his –

DOOM.

The Fabulous, Formless Dream

The craftsmith strokes his chin. This new chart is most interesting, its ideas and theories gathered from a range of fields – biopsychology, socio-anthropology, artificial linguistics. The resultant model of a modular and homeostatic system, part dynamics, part mechanics, seems a logical and subtly simple theory of the mind, with will and nerve hard-wired.

He traces the branching of the races and has to admit some small respect for the dustcrawlers; without humans there could never have been unkin, so it seems. He's not even *entirely* sure that the distinction could be classed as racial. Just a few recessive genes to separate them, carrying the angel out and up into the Vellum as the Cant bursts loose within, leaving the human crawling in the dust with a potential they can never quite realise. He pities them really, and he's fascinated by their similarities. It's a pity that they're

The glassy glittering waltz of light that is the Houri's Eye swirls out beyond the tower's confines now, unbound by tracks and trails

screw, escapes its mount, and tumbles down and down and down and –

Ah well. In the inner pocket of his jacket, a hip-flask presses against the watchman's ribs. He takes it out, unscrews the cap.

Looking into the scattered, shattered vortex of the Houri's Eye, he watches shapes and shades of illogic strafe and shift the city's streets into volutes like ink drops in a glass of water. Events in flow, endless involutions – maybe order itself is just an offshoot of this chaos. So maybe something will emerge out of the ruins.

He takes a slug of bitter firewater, of hope.

To a new cosmos, he thinks, born out of a core of chaos. And before long, as the liquid heats his heart, he's smiling to think of Chance as sovereign, unbound by the artifice of destiny. Fortune as a gambler's girl, unfaithful but seductive, sweet and ruinous in her semblance of integrity, of pattern, form. Fates with threads of song instead of twine. And looking out at a city where gods and men slaughtered each other on the streets, he's thinking, maybe the mysteries of a chaotic world will have less need of wars of light and dark to

such a threat.

There are those of the host who argue that to try and grave the humans into docility is insane. That they should simply wipe them out. He's sure though that, in time, he can decrypt, describe and re-inscribe the full features and functions of the mind and, like a spiritual surgeon, carry out the by-pass operation that's required. The ability to tessellate ideas is not all that has to be excised, but he knows if they can cut the latent Cant out of humanity at large the creatures will be little more than slaves in seraph servitude. The bitmites will lose interest in these shambling naked apes mute as the shabtis in the fields. There's a snag however.

In a corner of his office stands a mock-up, a display removed to be repaired. A black winged figure stands on perspex glacier, a long-dead graveman of the caves reborn as the first birdman of illusion's fields – another artefact, in a way, like all the ivory and stone and wood and bone intrications of weaponry and abodes around him. It seems to watch him as he lifts the little leatherbound book that's circulating in the

streets these days and causing so much strife. The Book of All Hours.

.....
The thing looks like nonsense when it's opened at first, incoherent, inchoate, but... after a while of reading there's a strange cohesion to it. The words are jumbled things – *riverrun* and *passencore* and such – confusions with no single meaning; rather it's as if the meaning of the parts is made out of the meaning of the whole. The reader has to read it...outside-in, let the senseless prosody, the seeming gibberish of poetry and idiom wash over them until the thresholds of the theme come clear. Reaching the end of it, he'd *known* that there was sense in there, not built of blocks to be constructed, but rather in the singularity of it, the text as a whole. The end is the starting point and only in understanding that does it begin to break down into acts then chapters, sections, paragraphs then sentences of sorts and, finally, into the words and morphemes that can be decrypted. He hefts it in his hand, this enigmatic and infuriating text.

.....
He flips a sheet of celluloid over the model,

sits now in the telescope seat, slugging every so often from his hip-flask. The tower sways, side to side and to and fro, a metronome loosed to tick in a tempo without rhyme or reason; it will not be long now before it sways itself into collapse.

.....
Far below in the piazza, black dots of citizenry stop and start in ebbs and flows, rushing in to swirl around as onlookers to the calamity, falling back in flight from the catastrophe, as a wave washes over and water trickles away and off the tilting deck of a ship. Slowly and fast, faster-forward and so slow rewound – already some are frozen as statues, others flickering like fireflies as the city streets sweep out of synch. Lights flicker on and off in windows, stream down streets, rivers of light running out to the edges of the city where its hard to tell now when the city ends and the spiralling silversea of singularities begins, the one so deeply embedded in the other, emergent from it or remerging with it.

.....
He imagines the stevedores at the docks, shucking aprons, picking up their coats,

lays the book down on a corner of it, picks a marker pen up and starts to sketch and scribble this suprasegmental force within the mind, this feature of the Cant whose very function seems to be to tear apart the sense of sense and recombine it in new forms, new themes, new understandings of the textures of reality. This is what he has to wipe out, this angel of eugenics, the fabulous, formless dream that shapes it all.

Outside, the bell of the Watch Tower strikes again:
DOOM.

Coiling Sinews Round A Serpent Soul

Even with the leather padding under and behind him, the watchman feels the tower's quiet answer to the wind that blows around it, the hum of resonance, vibrations tickling down his spine in shivers, coiling sinews round a serpent soul. We would not interfere with the fall of it all, the destiny of destiny, but we can make the end less harsh, we reckoned, watching him huddle against his pillar. So with a nip and a nibble we brought a ladder down this way, a strut down that way, wove him a path of wreckage to crawl down to comfort; he

punching timecards, slipping back all of a sudden to be at work again, apron on as they unload the last crate of the night, rushing forward again then, arms in coatsleeves, out the door, and in the tavern with a beer, drawn back out to the street then forward to the bar, to the brothel, to the window of the dreamwhore's room as they hear the great doom of the bell and then back to a joke and a smoke and a beer in the bar, and then forward and out, in and out, and again, and then standing there now, as the doom resounds, standing down in the rubble of the fallen watchtower.

.....
We wonder if he understands it now from the breathless height of his crow's nest. No more reckonings of time, no more ticks and tocks as definitions of the minutiae, only challenges and checks and questionings of uncertainty, with existence as the only answer, articulated in a liquid language of moods and modalities. No musts, only mights and shoulds and coulds and woulds.

—In the end, we whisper to him, even the dark has its own death, and destiny its –
DOOM.

A Language Whispered In Aromas

—Is alright, he says. Is good now.

The sandminer tries to shake his wife off but she pulls him indoors, yammering in her Irim Quarter dialect about crazy blind boys brought home for no reason – *trouble is, all trouble!* He pulls her into his arms even as she slams the door to the back yard shut, hand in her hair to smell it, nose in her neck to smell their scents so deep and structured, aye, and the balancing of strengths and weakness of their immunities, it makes so much sense now, aye, all mingling – the scent of illnesses she's beaten, of diseases he himself might fall to, scents of them both locking together in harmony, bonding like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, opposites attracting, strengths and weaknesses in balance. He understands it without words like *pheromone* or *immunity*, but he does understand it, all the secrets of scent unlocked by his plunge into the boy's mosaic of experience. It might not be romantic, of course, but if that's why he turned his head to look at the girl behind him on the tram that day, well, feh, how could it not fill him with wonder to think of the mysteries of a language whispered in aromas below the threshold of awareness.

He laughs as she tries to shake some sense into him – aye, as if he's not been shaken into sense himself.

.....
He looks at his darling's face – not just his *wife*, but as much his *darling* as the day they met – clasped in his hands, but he can hardly see her for the harmonics of colour singing like voices, melodies snatched as someone passes you whistling in a crowded street, or the clapping of hands in an audience in a music hall. It's a symphony of sight is her pretty face, seen not with all the structuring mechanics of forms and functions like an engineer but, aye, as a tear that's a drop of water falling past a flap of wings and down to shatter on a blade of grass and soak into the earth, into the soil, where it's sucked up into roots and evaporating out into the air only to fall again into a stream of drops going under and over others in a babble of river run into ocean thick with salt and moonbeat on the waves sunrising water into air and into furling cumulated clouds of steam and vapour recondensing cooler into a drop of water falling past –

—Is good now, he says.

He can only just make enough sense of his sight to see the way she's staring at him, horrified.

Out in the yard, in a world of change, the boy is singing light into a trinity of primal colours, shaping it with ups and downs of pitch, but also lefts and rights, forwards and backs. It's a song of edges, abstract geons, aspect snapshots, objects in motion, and more, so much more. O, it has shape like the joints of furniture or bodies, or of acts, events.

The sandminer tries to catch his breath, as his wife pushes him back from the door, plants herself across it. It's like he's got some book in a foreign language, in an unknown alphabet, open before him, utterly unfathomable, aye, but with a voice in his ear translating all those strange symbols into his native tongue, into *Red* and *Salt* and *Hot* and *Loud*. It's as if the way he's seen the world till now were just as arbitrary as the runiform marks of black ink on white paper used by scribes to signify this sound or that. And it's as if he's known that all along, all along known there's another way to see the world and speak of it, sing of it. Sing it. And he's remembering it now, aye.

The Cant.

Fields of illusion. Folds of delusion in the Vellum. An elusive, lucid dreamtime of allusions and elisions. The bitmites, artificers of sensation, forgers of imagination, hammering it into foresight and recall. And out in the yard – he pulls his darling wife aside, has to see, to remember, to know – outside the door he opens now, the boy sits in his strange construct of symbols schemed and structured in a sacred secret sculptural musaic inscripticate all over with the signatures of sense. And the sylph of a soul as the symbol in the centre of it all.

And the sandminer, this rough working everyman, he staggers out across the doll's heads and the broken mirrors to fall on his knees before the boy and join the lad's high and wavering voice with his own gruff song, because all it takes is to remember how.

Before long he hears his darling joining in and it's like the song their bodies used to sing in the slide of skin against skin back when they were first courting, their heartbeats heard and felt as a drumbeat, as a delicate but awesome –

DOOM.

Some Notes Towards A New Cosmogony

The watchman gazes down at all the waves and particles of humanity, the twisted framework of the city and the

sea of sky it sails in. He's spent his afterlife looking at the minutiae, measuring existence in ticks of certainty, measuring change in clicks of energy and position, dials spinning as he focused the telescope on this scene or that, magnified it, focused in.

Ah well.

Some notes towards a new cosmogony, he thinks: time as change, and change as chance, cascades and cadences of potentials; reality, underneath, no more than a casual wave of causality, a flighty certainty flipped in the air. If anything goes in the lawless infinitude of the infinitesimal, existence is as much a possibility as any other.

Order tossed out by chaos as a glib aside.

It's not what he would call stability but he can see some crazy sort of sense in the curves of change that carve the city below, spirals of streets entangled, lives involved. This strazza here, this piazza there, the unbound city has a strange integrity in the constances of instances. It is a city of souls in torsion, twisted together and twisted in upon their twists, so tight that they seem balls of time and space and mass, events – a coming of age, a birth, a death, wars, wanderings and wedding feasts, revenges and seductions. But under it all these are not forms but threads, jangling tangled threads of life and death, things as they are: the twang of a bass note on a blue guitar, a thumb thumped on the hollow wood... doom doom.

He takes another slug from his hip-flask.

Somewhere below, he could swear, someone is singing.

He looks at us now as we flutter around him, understanding a little of what we know, we bitmites who built the city for him, for all of them, human and unkin, here at the end of time. That as matter is just the sleek dark skin of light curled up into a ball, so the city is only a graving inked upon the Vellum, shifting with the rippling of the muscles underneath that skin. That chaos is the flesh and bones of our reality, order a dead skin to be sloughed. That we have dwelt, in this afterworld, in the articulated grace and glory of a dark and hidden power, death or dream, this final wakening to life our godless, merciless and mortal, terrible and beautiful –

DOOM. ▣

DREAMS OF INAN STEALING LIFE

By Antony Johnston

Dreams of Inan

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Antony Johnston

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Jamie Barras has most recently appeared in *Interzone* with 'Summer's End' (issue 204) and 'The Beekeeper' (issue 206). He is currently re-adjusting to the slow pace of life in Central London after ten months in Osaka, Japan. He misses his morning shot of Boss Rainbow Mountain.



Christopher Nurse is a filmmaker (writer/director) and digital illustrator. He is currently developing his debut feature, a horror film called *Nocturne*. Chris lives in Cardiff with a bull terrier called Mabb and a tribal art collection that scares the shit out of visitors.

WINTER by JAMIE BARRAS illustrated by CHRISTOPHER NURSE

Adiante, above the surface of Io • March 1998

Christian's visitor touched her hand to his cheek. "Khan," she said, touching off one of the viral packets that she had just transferred. It burst open, spilling its contents into Christian's brain. He frowned. "What does the Security Service want with me after all these years?"

"Din Eidyn." A second packet burst open, filling Christian's head with images of a woman walking through the arrivals hall of one of the Mars gateways – a ruddy-faced, red-haired woman with a heavier build than was fashionable.

"We were hoping you could tell us who that is, doctor."

"You must know who it is or else you wouldn't be here." Why had she come back? What was going on?

"Humour me," said Khan.

The North-Yorkshire Moors, Earth • January 1952

The Wintermen's air vehicle came out of the south like a storm. Wrapped in lightning and trailed by thunderclouds, it rose up from behind Chimney Bank Top and began to bear down on Rosedale Abbey. Christian watched it progress. It was a converted Morris pickup truck with empty wheel arches and a copper boiler ribbed in silver baffles mounted on its short bed. Electric-blue sparks crackled across the gaps between the baffles, and the whole

vehicle shook as it moved through the air as if it were hitting every bump in the road.

The pickup slowed as it approached the village and went into a hover at tree height above the crossroads just the other side of the river from where Christian and a small crowd of Rosedale Abbey residents had gathered. The clouds that had been trailing it settled into five sets of concentric rings centred on the copper boiler. Slowly, the sound of thunder died away, replaced by the hum of dynamos punctuated by the snap-crackle of electrical discharge. The truck steadied, and for a moment, no one moved.

Then Brian Close started across the bridge and headed for the crossroads.

Close was eighteen years old. By rights he should have been doing his National Service but thanks to the quarantine he was instead stuck working in a butcher's shop in Hutton-le-Hole. According to Christian's information, he had gone down to the river with some friends after chapel to play on the ice, but returned home prematurely, flushed and breathless. His mother had put him to bed, hoping that it was just a chill, but knowing that it probably wasn't; hoping that it might pass anyway, but knowing that it probably wouldn't.

By early afternoon, he was speaking in tongues. By three, Christian could hear the first rumblings of thunder in the south.

The passenger-side door of the converted Morris cracked open and a rope ladder

appeared. Brian Close started forward. No one else moved, not even Close's parents who were standing together at the front of the crowd, arms wrapped around each other, cheek to cheek, breath mingling in the chilly air.

Close reached the rope ladder and started to climb. As he neared the top, he turned and looked back. His eyes widened in surprise, as if he had not expected to see people standing there. His face clouded. He seemed uncertain suddenly, but the moment passed and his face grew calm again. He mouthed the word *Goodbye*, and then climbed the final few rungs and disappeared behind the open door of the pickup.

A moment later, a new figure appeared: a woman dressed in a creased and stained pair of khaki overalls. She began to haul up the rope ladder. At that same moment, Christian heard a commotion behind him in the crowd. Colin Beatty, a slaughterman with his own yard in Osmotherley, was trying to force his way through the press of people between him and the river bank, but the two Ted Beattys – Colin's brother and son – were holding him back. "Gina!" he was shouting, "Gina!"

It took Christian a moment to realise what was going on. He turned back to the Wintermen's vehicle and took a closer look at the woman hauling up the rope ladder. She had ruddy features and red hair.

"Gina!" Colin Beatty kept shouting. "Gina!"

And Christian recognised her at last.

Io

"It's Gina Beatty. She developed the Winter strain in early 1950, six months into the quarantine. But the last time that I saw her was two years later, in January of '52 – the day the Wintermen came for Brian Close."

She looked just as he remembered her, a figure frozen in time by the touch of Winter.

"And she fled with Close and the rest two years later?"

Christian and Khan were sitting in the small study area in the outermost room of Christian's cabin – Christian in his antique desk chair, the M1-5 agent in the window seat, backlit by the coronal discharge of *Adiante's* induction array. The agent was tall and slim, as was the fashion, and wore her hair cropped close to her head. She was dressed for shipboard in brown leather sandals, a cream silk shirt and khaki canvas trousers.

"Yes," said Christian. "She left with the rest."

Khan nodded and looked thoughtful. A Django Reinhardt side was playing on Christian's music system. He tried to lose himself in the music while he waited for Khan to respond. Why had Gina Beatty come back?

"That was...ah...forty-four years ago?"

"Yes." Khan's ID gave her age as 35. Any memory of the Wintermen that she might have would have to be viral.

"So what is she doing back here now, do you think?"

Christian was through playing that game. "Why don't you ask her?"

Khan smiled. "We already have."

The Security Service had Beatty in custody and had tried to crack her memory and failed; that was why they were trying to get Christian involved. For a long moment, he weighed his options. Then he shook his head. "So where are we going?"

"Not so very far – and we'll be meeting an old colleague of yours when we get there."

"An old colleague" – from Threadbare?" *Please God, not Garland-Manners.*

"Yes, from Threadbare: Webb – Doctor Frank Webb."

The North-Yorkshire Moors, Earth • November 1953

"Here we go." The Threadbare lifter rose into the air, wheeled about and then started south, still rising.

"How are things on Ascension?"

Christian asked.

Webb rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Garland-Manners is convinced the Wintermen are up to something. He's confined them to their compound and started conducting surprise searches. He's also ordered all Threadbare personnel to start carrying these." He tapped the revolver at his waist, a sour expression on his face. Webb might be RAF, but as a medical officer guns were not in his line.

Christian shook his head. "The man is a menace. How have the Wintermen reacted?"

"They've formed a grievance committee. The more militant of our little snowflakes are pushing for a withdrawal of co-operation until the restrictions are lifted."

"And what's Garland-Manners think of that?"

"He's placed the head of the committee under house arrest."

"Let me guess: Brian Close." Webb nodded. "You've told Garland-Manners how important he is to the project?"

"Close scares him," Webb said, as if that was justification enough for Garland-Manners's actions. "Sometimes he scares me too. Sometimes I think he's already cracked Winter's secrets and all he's doing is feeding us little bits and pieces, stringing us along until he's ready to..."

"To what?"

Webb was silent for a long moment. Then he shook his head. "I don't know. Could be that Garland-Manners's paranoia is catching. Close and his grievance committee seem to spend as much time poring over star-charts as they do discussing Garland-Manners's excesses."

"It's inevitable that they'd wonder about where the Winter strain came from – healthy even; a distraction from the job at hand, perhaps, but hardly subversive."

Webb shrugged: he wasn't going to argue. "How are things in the quarantine area? Your recent reports paint a gloomy picture."

Christian sighed. "We've had nothing but false starts and repeats for the past five months. I think we've harvested as much original material as we're ever going to. The outbreak is dying out."

"Do we have enough, do you think – to put it all together?"

"Enough for the Wintermen to put it all together, yes – provided Garland-Manners doesn't alienate them first."

The lifter crossed the Devon Coast and started out over the grey Atlantic. Webb offered Christian a cigarette. He wasn't a tall man, but he had a rower's physique.

Christian smiled, but as he reached forward to take the cigarette a spark snapped between the bulkhead and one of his cufflinks. He jerked back his arm and cursed.

Webb laughed. "De Havilland have done a bang-up job, but it's not exactly Pullman Class, is it? Still, you have to admit: the view makes the discomfort worthwhile."

The blue sky had given way to black, and Earthlight haloed the observation ports.

"Ascension Island in fifteen minutes, gents," the co-pilot called out from the cockpit.

Ithaca Chasma, Tethys • March 1998

"I hope you have better luck with her than I did," said Webb.

Christian was still adjusting the fit of the jumpsuit that the M1-5 technical officers had given him. He looked up as Webb finished speaking. "We'll soon see. We can meet up afterwards – get a drink."

They locked gazes for a moment. Webb nodded and smiled. "I'd like that." He turned and started back in the direction of the monitor station.

"I have to go too, Doctor Christian."

Still distracted, Christian turned towards Khan. "Yes, thank you, agent."

He waited for Khan to step back, but she just stood there. The trip from Io had been brief, and Christian had spent much of it trying to order his thoughts, but he and Khan had interacted enough for him to know that the hesitation he was seeing now was out of character. It made him uneasy. He wondered what she was building up to. At length, Khan held up her hand. "One last thing, if you don't mind."

She brushed her hand against Christian's cheek. Within moments all that Christian could remember about the woman in front of him was that she worked for the Security Service.

"A...personal precaution," the agent said. "I hope you don't mind, doctor."

"I...no. No, I suppose not."

The agent stepped back. Then suddenly the floor began to shake and the air filled with a groaning, wrenching sound. Christian gritted his teeth and waited for the disturbance to subside. The detention centre was fifty metres inside one of the ice walls of the Ithaca Chasma. Only the facility's folds prevented shear forces within the ice floes from tearing it apart. It was a hellish place to keep a human being, even one as dangerous as Gina Beatty.

Slowly, the floor settled and the hallway



grew quiet. Christian took a breath and reached for the handle of the airlock door.

Despite the vigorous cycling of the ventilation system the air inside Gina Beatty's cell remained charged with electricity – discharge from the anti-viral barrier that divided the six metre square interrogation room in two. Magnetic fields kept the barrier's ionising radiation confined within narrow limits, but Christian stayed well clear of it all the same. He stooped down and pressed one of the floor panels. It rose up on a heavy plastic base. He sat down and made himself comfortable.

Gina Beatty looked back at him from the other side of the anti-viral barrier. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her upper arms bound to the sides of her chest by a harness threaded through her jumpsuit.

Christian studied her while he collected his thoughts. She still had the face of someone who had lived her whole life on the English moors, her skin scoured by the wind, flushed red by exposure to cold and rain. A spider's web of broken blood vessels stretched across the bridge of her small nose. It was a country face, the face of a slaughterman's wife, a farm hand's mother. The effect was disarming; Christian had to remind himself that he was looking at a woman who had travelled further than almost any other human being alive, a woman who had seen things beyond the comprehension of most human beings and comprehended them.

Beatty smiled. "Doctor Christian."

The familiarity that Christian heard in her tone took him aback. "I...I don't think we ever met...?"

"But I do remember you, Doctor Christian." With some difficulty, she reached up and tapped a finger to the side of her head.

Christian had forgotten. "You pooled everything." How times had changed: forty-odd years earlier he had been horrified when he had learned that the Wintermen had virally encoded all their personal memories so that they could share them with each other. It had seemed such an *alien* thing for a human being to do. But here Christian was, forty-odd years later, living in a society built on differing degrees of the same transaction.

"Can you tell me why I'm being held here, doctor – like this?" Beatty pulled against her harness and dipped her head to the anti-viral barrier.

Christian knew that she must have

already asked that question of the MI-5 interrogators and possibly Frank Webb too. "What have they told you?"

"I'm a threat to the peace and security of the Earth."

Christian shrugged: then that was why.

"We've never been a threat to anyone.

You know that better than most."

"Mrs Beatty, do you know what happened after you released your viral bomb? We came close to nuclear war. In the event, the Soviet Union tore itself apart first, with only slightly less terrible results. Europe has remained an armed camp ever since, its borders secured against the eastward spread of the conflicts that have raged through the former Soviet republics these past four decades. Parts of Asia and Africa have seen similar upheavals."

"But you've embraced viral memory storage," Beatty countered, "and electromagnetics, longevity and the rest. And people have managed to spread out over the solar system despite the conflicts you describe."

"And do you know what's driven that expansion?"

A shadow moved by overhead: another Winterman lifter escaping northwards, this time unmolested

"Fear of the people who made the Winter strain?"

"No, Mrs Beatty, fear of you, of the Wintermen. The UK's extra-terrestrial outposts are Earth's first line of defence against the possibility of...this – your return."

"But why? Did they think we'd bring invaders from outer space back with us?"

"Have you?"

Beatty's mouth opened and closed. She stared at Christian for a long moment, then shook her head and said, "What makes the Security Service think that I'll tell you anything when I wouldn't talk to Frank Webb?"

Christian changed tack right along with her. "I was never part of Garland-Manners's excesses. I wasn't transferred to Ascension until just five weeks before you...left."

"And what makes *you* think I'll talk to you when I wouldn't talk to Frank?"

Christian shook his head. "I didn't – I don't – know that you would or will. I..." He looked at her for a moment then went on: "I saw Brian Close just before your escape from Ascension. Did you – do you –" he tapped the side of his head "– know

that? I ran into him as he was trying to reach the hangar. The fighting had already started, and I...I was armed." He shook his head. "Bloody stupid Garland-Manners and his bloody stupid security directives. I could have stopped him. But I didn't, I let him go – do you know that?"

Beatty smiled. It was such an odd thing to do in the circumstances that it made Christian uneasy. "I do, Doctor Christian. Yes, I do know that." Her smile grew broader. "You want to know why I'm back here – why we're back here?"

Christian was too surprised at Beatty's sudden mood swing to respond. What exactly had he said that had brought about this change in Beatty? She stared at him intently. "Ask me what we found out there, doctor."

Ascension Island, Earth • December 1953

"Brian, what have you done?"

A crackle of small-arms' fire sounded somewhere off to the left, followed by the piercing shriek that Christian had come to recognise as the sound of bullets embedding themselves in the folded space-

time surrounding the Wintermen lifters. Christian pressed back against the side of the Quonset hut. A thread of smoke drifted through the space between the hut and the hangar beyond. Christian coughed. Then there was a sudden lull in the sounds of battle: the lifter had moved away. Christian heard someone – Lieutenant Dawley? – ordering a squad to get after it.

"We've done what you asked us to do, Doctor Christian," Close said. "We've made the Winter strain 100% communicable."

With a start, Christian realised that he still had his pistol trained on Close. Close was standing near the corner of the hut, half-turned towards the hangar; watching Christian, weighing the situation. He was leaner than the boy that had joined the Wintermen two years earlier, but still youthful looking, his face still dusted with freckles the same shade of auburn as his hair.

Christian lowered his pistol. "But...but you've...you've *released* it?" He was still trying to come to grips with what was happening – with what the Wintermen had done.

"Yes."

"How much of it?"

"All of it, Doctor Christian, the whole of Winter – and a lot more besides."

A shadow moved by overhead: another Winterman lifter escaping northwards, this time unmolested.

"You might get away from here, but you'll never make it back to England. They'll be waiting for you there. Can't you see that? Can't you see what you've done? You'll never get to see your families now."

"We're not going back to England. We've decided: we're going out there." He pointed to the sky. "We're going to find the people who made Winter."

Tethys

"Go on: ask me what we found out there."

Christian's heart was racing. He held up his hands. "Listen, please, Mrs Beatty –"

"Nothing," said Beatty. "We found nothing out there."

Christian stared at her for a long moment. Then he cursed and got up and moved back towards the airlock. "Release the hatch! Release the hatch – I know where they're going!"

"What happened to Winter, Doctor

trailed by two of his comrades. They were all three carrying gap guns and surrounded by a blizzard of free-floating armourlets.

"This isn't the way," Christian said, as soon as he was sure that the soldiers were out of earshot.

"We don't have time to be subtle, doctor: the Toller Blanket won't keep the Austrians fooled for long."

Christian had already questioned the wisdom of keeping the Austrian government in the dark. But Khan's superiors had refused to budge. Informing the Austrians was as good as informing the French, current holders of the Europe-in-Common presidency, and the British were once more 'on the out' with the French. So the British Government would not countenance any action that might deliver the Wintermen to them.

"They're too strong," said Christian. "Can't you see that? They've had over forty years out there –" he gestured up at the night sky "– to perfect their technologies." He could see the top of the ridge now silhouetted against that same sky. He felt his heart begin to quicken. At that same

from the trees a few metres to the right of where he was standing. As he came closer, Christian saw that it was Brian Close. He wasn't surprised. Close gestured towards the castle. "I appreciate you must have hoped you'd seen the last of Hartheim."

"How long have you known?" Christian asked.

"That the cover story was just that?" Close tipped his head to one side and studied Christian's face. "Not long in the scheme of things. We spent nearly thirty years searching for signs of intelligent life beyond the solar system. And even when it began to dawn on us that there wasn't any, we still couldn't quite accept that everything that we'd been told was a lie." He shook his head. "It Came From Outer Space': it sounds daft now, but, oh, how we wanted to believe that it was true. It was another ten years before enough of us had given up on that fantasy that we had the votes we needed to turn around and come home. To find the real source of the Winter Strain."

"But what led you here?"

"Not 'what', 'who': Frank Webb."

For a moment, Christian was dumbfounded. Then he realised the significance of Close so readily revealing Webb's role. "You know about Tethys."

"We recovered Gina and Doctor Webb shortly after you left the British Army lines."

Shortly after they had got what they wanted: Christian back on the road to Hartheim. The pieces had begun to fall into place: the Wintermen had allowed Gina Beatty to be captured, knowing somehow that MI-5 would send for Webb. Was Webb working for the Security Service? In any event, Webb and Beatty had played out their charade and then someone, probably Webb, had suggested that Christian be sent for, as someone from Threadbare not tainted by any association with Garland-Manners's team.

"Why go to such lengths to bring me here?" said Christian. "You could have just come to Io, and the British and American governments would never have been any the wiser."

"You know why," said Close. And Christian did.

They moved away from the trees, leaving the road and moving across the fresh-clipped grass towards the castle's north-west corner. They seemed to be alone, but Christian knew that there were at least half a dozen other Wintermen in the

Christian?" Beatty called out from behind the barrier. "Do you remember what happened to Winter?"

Europe-in-Common, Earth

The sky split open and the stars came tumbling down. Christian gritted his teeth, shook his head to try to clear the ringing in his ears and stumbled on up the slope. Then suddenly, in a flash of blue light, the sky snapped back to normal as the spike that the assault team had launched expended itself uselessly on the Wintermen's folds in a blaze of Cherenkov radiation. Christian drew to a halt to get his bearings. His head began to clear.

"We have to keep moving, doctor," said the MI-5 agent that Christian once again knew was named 'Khan', as she came up on his shoulder.

Christian shook his head. "I'm sorry, it's just the recoil from the field-effect weapon...how can your troops operate under these conditions?"

"You get used to it, sir," a soldier said as he appeared from behind Khan. Without saying another word, he moved past Christian and continued on up the slope

moment, the horizon flared and a fresh burst of Cherenkov radiation lit up the night as another spike shattered against the Wintermen folds. Christian had not even detected its launching. The armourlet-shrouded soldier had been right: you did get used to it. "It's useless," he went on. "You'll never get them this way."

"That is why you're here," said Khan.

They had tarmac'd over the old road since Christian had last trodden it. It seemed strange to be following its familiar course through the pines trees and not feel and hear the gravel crunching beneath his feet. There were houses set back amongst the trees that were new to Christian too. They were in the same broad-fronted, single-storey style as buildings that he remembered, but the placing was all wrong. He took the final turn in the road and emerged finally from the trees.

The castle loomed large on the open ground beyond, its walls a ghostly white in the fitful light of a waning crescent moon. The sight took Christian's breath away.

"Thank you for coming," a voice called. Christian turned. A figure emerged

castle grounds. The British Army officer who had negotiated the truce had said as much when he returned to the assault team's temporary HQ. They were there somewhere in the trees, or the houses beyond. Christian reached up and ran the back of his hand over his brow. It came away dripping with sweat. He could feel the heat rising from the ground through the soles of his feet – fallout from the impact of the assault team's spikes on the Wintermen's folds. His mouth had gone dry.

As they drew closer to the castle, Christian could begin to make out its many windows. "Empty," Close said, as if reading his mind. "It was flats for a while, but it's a museum now. That's –" he gestured at a glass wall that barred the way to the entrance to the castle courtyard – the memorial they built. We'll have to go over the top if we're going inside."

Christian shook his head. "No need." He paused to get his bearings. Then he pointed off into the trees immediately west of the courtyard entrance. "Over there."

Christian stopped a few metres inside the tree-line, where the level ground gave way to the slope beyond. He swept his hand around in an arc over the ground in front of him. "Here – this is the place you want. This is where we scattered the ashes of the men who made the Winter strain."

"In the beginning, we simply wanted to create brain function where there was none. We injected matter from the brains of healthy individuals into the brains of the mentally retarded – and vice versa. Most of our subjects died, but we kept going. We kept experimenting. After eighteen months, we could take a hundred men with, for example, no engineering knowledge, inject matter harvested from the brain of an engineer, and within days half a dozen of the survivors would begin to exhibit comparable engineering skills – within days, not the years it had taken the donor to acquire this knowledge. But this was not merely rote learning. Some of our subjects were able to integrate this introduced knowledge with their own knowledge base in such a way that they displayed skills above that of the donor. It was matter from the brains of these subjects that we used as material for subsequent experiments.

"We secured funding from the Air Ministry. They were interested in new methods of powering their aircraft, and in new ways of safeguarding the lives of their aircrews. After six months, and a

dozen iterations, we had created a group of experimental subjects with abilities far above those of even the best of the Reich's scientists – nearly two hundred men in all; they occupied the whole of the stable block." He gestured back the way he and Close had come at the long low buildings running along the southern and eastern side of the castle grounds. "We called them our '*Sondereshauptideen Gruppe*' – our 'special advanced ideas group'."

Christian turned and looked at Close for the first time since he had begun speaking. "Electromagnetic propulsion systems and self-healing wounds – the beginning of longevity –" he touched his hand to his cheek – "were the discoveries of that first *S Gruppe*. Goering was so pleased that he presented our work to Hitler personally. This was in the Spring of 1940.

"Hitler was horrified," Christian turned away from Close and down to the ground once more. "We had taken men who, in the eyes of the law, were less than men and we had elevated them to the level of supermen.

"We were ordered to euthanise the whole of the *S Gruppe*. We fought against

Himmler's Interior Ministry with orders to find ways to turn men into slaves, not geniuses – to fix in the minds of men the idea of the supremacy of the state. And Hitler wanted this transition affected not be means of an injection, but through the air. Blind obedience to the state delivered by a gas, or –"

"Or a virus?"

"Yes, or a virus. But, in truth, even after all our years of work we still knew so very little about how the brain worked. We knew that introducing the right matter to the right areas of the brain produced positive results in a few cases, but beyond that...?"

"At the same time, we knew exactly how to resolve those unknowns. We could not fathom the workings of the human brain, but had the means at our disposal of creating people who could – of creating a second *S Gruppe*. This new *S Gruppe* could be tasked to look both within, at the changes the introduced matter was working within their own brains, and without, at means of engineering a vector for wider transmission and take up – at a means of making the strain 100% communicable.

They seemed to be alone, but Christian knew that there were at least half a dozen other Wintermen in the castle grounds

those orders. All our work, all the ideas the subjects had already realised and were yet to realise would be lost with them. But, in the end, only one could be saved, a sometime assistant in the clinic –"

"Winter," said Close, speaking for the first time in many minutes. "Karl-Franz Winter."

"Yes," said Christian. "Karl-Franz Winter. He became the project's living test tube, with all of the fruits of that first *S Gruppe*'s labours stored –" he tapped the side of his head – "up here."

"Describe Karl-Franz Winter to me, doctor."

"Winter? In the language of the time, he was a 'degenerate' – a painter of degenerate art, a player of degenerate music, a practitioner of degenerate –"

"A surrealist, a jazz musician and a homosexual."

"As I said: 'in the language of the time.'"

"What happened to Winter, doctor? Do you remember what happened to Winter?"

Those questions again: Beatty had asked the exact same thing. "Hitler had a new project in mind for us," said Christian. "We were placed under the control of

"And by this time, we had realised that we could greatly increase our chances of success if we broadened the different types of subjects that we used in the experiment – utilising not just adult males, but women and children too. We could do it. We could produce a new *S Gruppe*, a better *S Gruppe*. But Himmler would not allow us to use patients for this project – Hitler had forbidden it. We would have to use 'good' Germans. But that could only commence after we had first solved the problem of the high mortality rate amongst experimental subjects.

"We spent the next four years refining our techniques, distilling a new benign but still active fraction of brain matter, until, finally, we had viable material that could be injected into the bloodstream rather than directly into the brain, and were ready to start to create our second *S Gruppe* from civilians conscripted from the local population.

"But we had taken too long. We – the whole of Greater Germany – had run out of time. It was early 1945; the Russians were approaching from the East, the Americans and British from the West.

Himmler ordered the project abandoned and all traces of its existence erased. And this time there was to be no saving of any of the surviving patients. Not even...not even Karl-Franz Winter."

Christian's throat was constricted. He was finding it hard to breathe. "But, Doctor...I...all our work, all *my* work: I could not let them destroy all my work."

"Not your work," Close said softly, "Manfred Christian's work." He moved around to stand in front of Christian. "Christian was willing to do anything to protect his life's work – even die. It's okay, Herr Winter. It's okay."

"Rather than see his life's work destroyed, Christian swapped identities with you. He took your identity documents and gave you his. Then he went down into the cellar with the surviving experimental subjects. We knew all that. What we didn't know, until now, is if you remembered any of it." "Do you remember what happened to Winter?" "We weren't sure what Christian had done, what injections he might have given you. But you do remember, don't

you? You remember it all."

"Yes, but you don't understand," said Winter. "I was the one who gave him the opiates injection. He saved my life – twice – and I killed him."

"Manfred Christian was a monster, Mister Winter. He killed hundreds and supervised the deaths of thousands more."

"I injected all the rest," said Winter. "The last few surviving patients that we'd been using as experimental subjects in preparation for creating the second *S Gruppe*. Men, women and children – nearly two dozen human beings. And I had stood by while Christian killed dozens as he – we – refined the process across the four years leading up to that."

"You were placed in an impossible situation. You're one of Christian's victims, just as surely as they were. You survived to bear witness. I'm here to tell you, Mister Winter, that you can stop blaming yourself."

Christian wasn't listening. "The Russians were getting closer. I fled south – " he gestured in that direction – "to Styria. The British picked me up near Graz. Karl-Franz Winter was born in Linz – inside what was soon to become the Russian zone. He was

a musician, of no use to the British. They would have handed Karl-Franz Winter over to the Russians. But not Doctor Manfred Christian; Doctor Manfred Christian had knowledge that the British could use. And so I remained Doctor Manfred Christian. I went back to England with the British. And there I created Threadbare."

He met Close's gaze. "And four years later, after I had demonstrated to the British that our methods truly were non-lethal, after they had created a cover story that could disguise the true origins of the technologies that we had already created, I took the knowledge that was floating around in my brain and injected it into you."

"It is very beautiful, the galaxy," Close said, as if he had not heard what Winter had said. "That was why we found it so hard to turn around and come home. We may not have found any intelligent life, but we did find *life*, and many other wondrous things." He stared at Winter. "Come with us, Herr Winter. Let us show them to you."

"I did this to you. I picked the North-Yorkshire Moors as an experimental site.

The British Government wanted to use a small island off the coast – easier to quarantine – but I convinced them that people would believe the cover story more readily if we used a site less well-suited to our purpose, a site harder to secure. We faked the 'UFO' crash, and then I came into your villages and towns and with my medical kit. Do you remember?"

"It's alright, Herr Winter."

"Do you remember?" Winter was close to tears now.

"Yes," Close conceded. "You said you were inoculating us against whatever had been released by the crash."

"Then why do you want me with you?"

"You're one of us, Herr Winter. You're the original Winterman. You can be yourself with us. Come with us." He gestured at the ground in front of them. "Leave Manfred Christian here, dead and buried, and come with us."

"I don't know how to," Winter said. He had been Manfred Christian for longer than he had been Karl-Franz Winter.

"You'll have time to learn. Listen: here comes our lift."

Thunder sounded in the south. ▀

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M. John Harrison was born in Rugby, Warwickshire and spent much of his early life wandering the woods and fields outside the town. His most recent novel is *Nova Swing*. 'The Good Detective' is set in West London, where he now lives.



David Gentry was born in 1977 and currently lives in Kent. A self-taught artist (after a stint at an art college) he creates his artwork digitally using anything that comes to hand including photographs, scans, paint and ink. His work has been seen in many publications including *Computer Arts*, *Interzone* (sometimes twice in one issue!), *Digit Magazine*, *The Third Alternative*, *Exposé* and *Spectrum* as well as CD covers and private commissions. He is currently working on the long awaited *Black Static* magazine.

THE GOOD DETECTIVE by M. JOHN HARRISON illustrated by DAVID GENTRY

Primrose Hill, that hour when things get hold of you, five o'clock on a dull Saturday afternoon. Single fathers are leading their little girls up and down the wet pathways and you can see the Regents Park birdhouse draped like fruit netting across the nearer trees. A systems manager walks away from his first wife. All she was doing was making a phone call, answering a text. She looks up and he's gone. He's taken the children with him.

Where is she supposed to start looking for him? The world's full of harassed men his age, with two daughters and a suitcase. The trains and buses are full of them.

Eventually someone puts her on to me. She's upset. It's new to her, but frankly I'm used to it. People do this all the time. They're trying to get away from themselves. They're trying to reinvent, and why not? London's kind to the confident. Otherwise, what is there? Get on the tube in the morning and people stare straight into your face from less than one foot distance. That's no way to live. So they go missing, and I find them. I find kiddies and criminals, and people who would do crimes if they knew how. I find the people who paint themselves on to your walls, play their favourite music over and over again then leave you nothing but a picture in the night.

I never look for the ordinary ones. They're too easy to find. They've cashed in on the housing differential, abandoned Islington. They're off to the Cotswolds:

no mortgage, walk the children to school, grow your own vegetables. They've disqualified themselves.

Listen to this, though –

A man lives in Putney, Barnes, East Sheen, one of those places along the river. He's an actor, an investment banker, a publisher's editor – it doesn't matter. Or he sells something, say mobile phones. Say he sells mobile phones. One day he gets tired of that. He decides to write a travel book about the area he lives in. This area is two miles on a side, roughly square, no hard boundaries. That is, it's bounded on its north and west by the curve of the Thames: but he can cross that if he wants, and enjoy the other bank – willows, a couple of muddy playing fields and an old bandstand. A little road with allotments on one side which in the spring looks like a lane in the country. Over there it doesn't look like London at all.

This man buys several notebooks of the brand the famous Bruce Chatwin used to use for his writing. He buys some gel pens of different colours. He buys a Nikon 775 digital camera. Then he sets off into the streets which surround his house, intending to record everything he sees.

Winter. Late afternoon. Christmas is close. It's on his heels. The streets are dark and at the same time comfortable, narrowed by cars and a sense of warmth, a sense of drawing-together which seems to come from the houses on either side. The women

have fetched their kids from playschool and finished parking their SUVs. In one street of little workingmen's cottages they close the curtains; in the next there are gleams of light from every window. Every street has its own culture. Here it's more BMWs than Audis; there, they'll keep a pedigree dog but a pedigree cat is extravagant. Wood floors, a child sitting on a sofa with its knees up, watching something you can't see. She stares out, startled by the flash of the Nikon. The traveller smiles, waves, moves on. Is that the river at the end of the street? Is that a Toyota? He's already lost.

To begin with, he brings all this back. From the Nikon he downloads smoky still images of Barnes bridge, taken a few hundred yards downriver on an afternoon that makes it look like industrial archeology in Manchester or Bremen. His notes say: "Every rivet stands out."

When I claim some people are too easy to find, what do I mean?

Poll tax gave rise to a generation which lived in other people's houses. They formed strong personal ties yet remained evasive, incurious about one another. As a result, never fully sited, they suffered mild depressions and moved on. I'm not looking for them.

A train ride with someone you met yesterday. The smell of diesel fuel in carriage air. You look sideways at her face, you're not even sure you like her. The plain fact

is she looks more grown up than you. Her house is cold and needs work. She has a kid. She says things like, "I've always got by on my wits." That's exciting but eventually you interpret it as a judgement. Later you see that's how she lives her life, as a judgement, as an ideological act. It's too forceful. It's too blunt. Worse, it doesn't work. She's just as compromised and vulnerable as you. Later still the pathos of that hits you, but by then she's long gone and you are too.

I'm not looking for her.

Afternoon, Old Compton Street. Rain makes it like an older version of itself. I'm doing the bars with a photograph. "Can I just show you this? This is a sixteen-year-old boy who's gone missing. You haven't seen him round here have you? No? Can I just leave this with you?" Meanwhile in some other street – Ghost Town, Croydon, UK – the boy's parents have consulted a clairvoyant. She has a vision of him washed up in the waiting room at St Thomas' Hospital, Waterloo. Easy enough to check. I find he called there using a false name, but "became frightened" and left without treatment. Treatment for what? They can't say. That's a bit more interesting to me, especially the clairvoyant, but it's still not quite what I mean.

Facts are the easiest things to come by. From age fourteen upwards, girls run away more often than boys. Yet twice as many adult men go missing as adult women. Men aged twenty-four to thirty are likelier to disappear than any other group. More people go missing from the South East than any other region in the UK. What did they leave? Well, they left home. Why did they go? They can't tell you. People run away. They relocate, they go missing, as we've said. That's a geographical statement as much as a social one. It's what makes them easy to find.

The challenge is in the ones who go missing in their own lives. There's less to know about those people. They live inside us. They have very simple ideas. We rarely hear their voices before it's too late.

What does he want, this man from Barnes, whatever his name is? His intention is still unclear. Is he a traveller or only a tourist? Worse, is he a psychogeographer? To start with, he brings it all back. He comes home, seven every evening, just as if he's been to work. He's diligent. He keys his notes into the Sony; he downloads his pictures. It's an act of capture. For now, at least, his is the narrative of a man who begins to write

a book about the immediate area he lives in – a radius of a few ordinary London streets – with every oriel window and garden ornament, every spalled brick wall, described as a feature. Then one day, from a narrow corner in "Little Chelsea", East Sheen, he hears the following dialogue:

"Now she's begun to claim it's boring here."

"Well of course, it is."

He stands up close, but he can't see in. He imagines a room smelling of death, with two old people talking their dreary talk beneath the crosses, pietas, and old photographs on the walls.

"What's her name?"

"I only know her as Myra."

A long pause, and then:

"We wanted that war. All of us wanted that war. World War Three was the great imaginative act of its day."

"Children are better in pairs."

After that there's only a sound like someone doing the washing up. A cough. Later, at home, he realises he hasn't written any of it down. The next morning he takes the Nikon but forgets the notebook. Soon he's leaving them both behind. He feels relieved. A little guilty. He feels naked. Two years later his wife finds out he doesn't work in communications any more. That's when she calls me.

I listen to the family's ideas. It helps them. I appear receptive but that's a pretence. All I need is the facts. Who's missing. When it happened, or when the relatives first noticed it had happened. I don't want their theories. They come to my office and sit uncomfortably looking at the desk and the dusty filing cabinet and wishing they had gone somewhere else.

Whatever I say they always ask themselves: "Why did he do this?"

I could tell them. From age forty he had the feeling of being spread very thin on the world, like a specialised coating. If people weren't careful with him, he felt, if he wasn't careful with himself, he'd crack or peel or flake away. Then one day he was trying to understand the instructions for some household appliance, and where it said, "How to set up the timer," he read instead: "How to let things slip." In the end, even the correct reading began to seem odd to him. "Timer?" he thought.

That would have been the way it was.

For the sake of the family I ask all the usual questions. Did he seem to be getting thinner? Did he have – some evenings

and in dim light – a kind of transparency, an abraded look which you could detect one minute but not the next? For the sake of the family I look through the stuff he left behind: it's a collection of professional qualifications, Barbour jackets and Australian stable boots. It's a shelf of music CDs, English light classical. I find his laptop. I find the travel notes and picture files, stored under Personal, and it's all much as you'd expect – that naive, eviscerating attempt they always make to express their inner life as a record of the outer. I find the garage he sold the Audi to: it was a TT, very nice condition. I get positive responses at the White Hart, the Bull, and the Sun – he was seen in all three, last Boat Race day. But what did those locations mean to him?

Nothing, compared to the wall he puts his back against now, as, quaking with Thames fever, he rests after the long slog up through the woods from the railway, past Marc Bolan's memorial and on to the Roehampton Gate. He's emaciated, stripped down. He's so far ahead of me! What began as observation became an adventure then a trajectory of relapse, a going-native. The long slow slide into the heartland of his imagination.

Eventually I'm on some windy hill, Richmond Park, early morning. I know he was here before me, quivering like an animal that's got the scent of distance in its nose, turning his head slowly so he can discover everything with those new eyes of his. But that was two years ago, and even if he was here yesterday I won't catch him. He's got his second or third wind by now. He's used to it. In his mind he's pushing an old bicycle loaded with his things, first towards Wimbledon then down the long heartbreaking sweep of the A3 to the sea. It's his space now.

I call the wife.

I say: "He's in your house but he's not here any more."

I say: "You knew that already."

I advise her: "If you find the husk, leave it where it is. They're often in the garden somewhere; or the attic."

Some of them you track down. Others you don't, and often that's the best thing. Because what are you going to do? Corner them in the loading bay behind a supermarket in Dalston? Chase them down a muddy path in Stoke Newington cemetery, calling out in a language they can't remember? Back them up against themselves until there's nowhere left to run and whatever dissatisfaction drove them

inwards, whatever fire they're full of, bursts out of the neck and sleeves of their crap old raincoat and they go up in front of you like a bundle of dry sticks? I've seen that happen, believe me it's not worth it.

.....
Another afternoon, another bar. I'm always on the lookout for the boy who called in at St Thomas' Hospital then, unable to control his anxieties, left before he could be treated.

"You can't keep them away," the barman says. "They're so bloody anxious to start their lives." He treats the photo to his oblique, dismissing glance. "They think of this as life," it makes him say. He laughs. "You should be here in the evenings." Whatever he's seeing is so ordinary it's beyond his power to describe. "Life!" he repeats.

"You run the place," I remind him.

"Too true," he admits, turning back to the spirit optic.

A missing person inside your own life.

OK, I'm not sure what I mean by that.

But the good detective shares some of those qualities of absence. Qualities of self-disenfranchisement, for instance. He's a torn place in the web which would otherwise detain him – home, family, profession, culture. I went missing from my own life years ago, but you don't need me to tell you that.

And what if, in the end, I'm wrong? What if Missing of Barnes only ran away, the way the majority of them do?

Well then I'll know.

One day I'll stand in an upper room in Harringay, looking out. The rain will be falling almost invisibly on the shiny black branches of the trees, dripping off again in big soft quick drops. At the bottom of the garden next door I'll see a man working in a shed. It'll be him.

I see him like this. He's wearing a blue plaid shirt and safety glasses. His dog sniffs round his feet. Every so often he stops what he's doing and comes to the door of the shed and looks out into his garden, or across it towards his house. The dog stands by his leg, its head just touching his knee. It's an old dog with a grey muzzle. After a moment they go back into the shed. He moves the wood from one place to another inside. He puts it up on the workbench. He takes it off again. Everything happens very quietly and comfortably under the yellow light above the bench, and the afternoon slowly gets dark around him. A growing pile of offcuts appears by the shed door and, absorbing the rain, turns from white to sandy brown. ▀

STORIES BY PAUL MELOY

Islington Crocodiles

COMING SOON FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF INTERZONE

The Last Great
Paladin of Idle
Conceit

Raiders

Don't Touch the
Blackouts

The Last Place on
Earth for Snow

Running Away to
Join the Town

Black Static

Dying in the Arms
of Jean Harlow

The Vague

Islington Crocodiles

An Ocean by
Handfuls

**'Crisp and inventive, fresh and distinctive.
Really, an unmissable gig!' Graham Joyce**

[WITH ARTWORK BY VINCENT CHONG]

Gwyneth Jones was born in Manchester, 1952. She's the author of more than twenty novels for teenagers and several highly regarded sf novels for adults. She's won two World Fantasy awards, the Arthur C. Clarke award, the British Science Fiction Association short story award, the Dracula Society's Children of the Night award, the P.K. Dick award, and shared the first Tiptree award, in 1992, with Eleanor Arnason. She lives in Brighton with her husband and son; a Tonkinese cat called Ginger and her young friend Milo. 'Big Cat' is a standalone story featuring the characters from the *Bold As Love* novels.



Stefan Olsen lives in Sweden where he makes dark and moody art, as epic as he can make it, trying to stay as true to life as he can, with a hint of fantasy to make things interesting. He is inspired by too many fantastic artists to mention, but it is the paintings of Carravaggio which have the greatest influence on him.

BIG CAT by GWYNETH JONES illustrated by STEFAN OLSEN

There were five people in the farmhouse kitchen, in the dark of dawn: Tris Lancoffe and his wife, who was the local vet; Theo the cowman; Eval Jackson in his chair; and Demi, Bel Lancoffe's eight-year-old daughter. They had the TV on with the sound turned down. The room was gloomy in lamplight, warmed by the big wood-burning range. A black and white cat called Selby was curled in a tight ball on the rag rug. The other cat, Frost, was up on the kitchen table, settled plumply on a sheaf of farm accounts. The adults were drinking tea, black tea from South Asia: one of those everyday comforts that was getting very hard to find.

"There used to be a world out there," said Tris. Insomnia was plaguing him, he'd had another bad night: it sapped his morale. "I was part of it, even if I didn't want to be. I read the newspapers, I watched TV, I felt the tug on the heartstrings when there was a tsunami in Japan, or a girl murdered in Birmingham. There were layers and layers where hurt didn't touch anything vital. Now I've got you guys, and Demi, and chaos beating on the door."

The windows were still dark with November gloom. Theo glanced at the clock, and nodded sympathetically. "I know what you mean."

"It's all that was ever real, Tris," said Bel, gently. "We'll be okay."

"Count your blessings," advised Eval, always tough on any show of weakness.

"You got the farm, we got my disability allowances. We're in clover. Hell is in London, eh?"

They'd been up late, playing cards. Tris had fetched Eval over, and he'd stayed that night: Eval didn't drive. Shortly Tris would be driving him home again, and taking Demi to school on the same trip. At this reminder they all turned to the vision of hell on the TV screen, where a few thousand people swarmed in what seemed a vast fire and smoke-lit cavern, pogoing like jackhammers. The chief demon, monstrously tall, monstrously agile, leapt about the stage: roping girders, shooting up the ropes, winging down from on high. He wore an ochre yellow suit, his head was a skull, fresh-stripped. Arcs of sweat flew glittering from the blueish, flesh-sharded cranium. The skullhead wore dark glasses, as did his bandmates. The eyes of the pogoers, when the cameras caught them, had a frantic, darting glitter. They swirled like shoals of fish, fleeing from unseen predators.

The show was live, thought it was 7AM in Camden Town the same as it was in Cornwall. The composition of the mosh was frightening: not just young men and a few bold babes, but middle-aged women, headscarfed Muslim girls, business suits, senior citizens, police and emergency services in dishevelled uniform, all prancing in the same pandemonium. Demi was enthralled. She was being allowed to

watch it for the sake of the newstape than ran along the base of the picture: held to be the most reliable source of information on terrifying events in the capital.

"What fuckin' scares me," said Eval. "Is that *those* bastards are the good guys. Or so they'd have us believe. What's the alternative?"

Demi, wise child, didn't react. Bel recoiled. "Don't, Eval."

"Sorry. It slips out. I usedter be a rock-star, y'know."

They knew. Eval's fall from fame, his bitter loss, was ever-present: a lot harder to live with than his bodily weakness. "I don't want you to use language like that in my house," said Bel. "We aren't *like* that. We aren't uncontrolled, violent –"

"Not yet," muttered Tris. He reached for the teapot. "I'll put more hot water in this. Demi, have you got everything? We're off in ten –"

Then came the cry. A fierce, guttural peremptory yowl; repeated.

The cats fled, hugging the floor, to the kitchen's darkest recesses

"What the f-!" gasped Theo, and slapped a hand over his mouth.

Another yowl, and a strange, dragging sound. Tris leapt up and grabbed his shotgun. These days it was always by the door; and loaded.

"Stay here! I'll go and see."

.....
The farmyard was drenched in mist, its

READERS' POLL

STORY

- 1 Longing for Langalana
Mercurio D. Rivera
- 2 Karel's Prayer
Chris Beckett
- 3 The New Chinese Wives
Will McIntosh
- 4 Ten With a Flag
Joseph Paul Haines
- 5 The Beekeeper
Jamie Barras
- 6 The Last Reef
Gareth Lyn Powell
- 7 Summer's End
Jamie Barras
- 8 Wax
Elizabeth Bear
- 9 Sundowner Sheila
F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre
- 10 2+2=5
Rudy Rucker & Terry Bisson
- 11 Among the Living
Karen D. Fishler
- 12 Blue Glass Pebbles
Steven Mills
- 13 Sheila
Lauren McLaughlin
- 14 Harsh Oases
Paul Di Filippo
- 15 This Happens
David Mace
- 16 In the River
Justin Stanchfield
- 17 Spheres
Suzanne Palmer
- 18 The Measure of Eternity
Sean McMullen
- 19 The Unsolvables Deathtrap
Jack Mangan
- 20 A Brief History of the Dream
Library
Elizabeth Hopkinson

ART

- 1 Leaving the Harbour (201 cover)
Fahrija Velic
- 2 Untitled (204 cover)
John Picacio
- 3 Planet of Peril (205 cover)
Jim Burns
- 4 The Rising Tide
illustration by Ales Horak
- 5 Beehive (202 cover)
Dan Dos Santos
- 6 Exiles (203 cover)
Mark Garlick
- 7 Sententia (207 cover)
Richard Marchand

MARTIN McGRATH WRITES: We received nearly double last year's total votes. The clear winner in the story category was 'Longing for Langalana' by Mercurio D. Rivera. There were many fewer negative votes this year. The positive/negative split in 2005 was a ratio of 2.3:1 compared to this year's figures, which was 4.3:1. The number of stories receiving aggregate negative scores more than halved. The number of stories that received no negative votes at all increased from 24% to 36% this year. Only one story received no positive votes. The top twenty stories are listed on the left. The number of votes cast for artwork was disappointingly small. As a result only a fraction of the eligible art received any votes, dominated mostly by the covers (perhaps not surprisingly). 'Leaving the Harbour' by Fahrija Velic came top, while Ales Horak's illustration of 'The Rising Tide' was the only interior illustration to break the covers' stranglehold on the top places. The top seven artworks are listed on the left.

Many thanks for your comments, all read and taken into account. Here's just a brief selection:

J.B. Zeetle: Before getting to grips with the Readers' Poll, could I just request that you pass a message on to the current editors: KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK. *Interzone* 207's new size and matt finish improved readability quite a lot. It also helps that the stories, interviews and film reviews are well structured and thoughtful. [...] The content of issues 206 and 207 have maintained an upsurge of thought-provoking and well-developed theories, even if a couple of the stories had foreseeable conclusions. [...] Personally I find Richard Calder a bit like a politician, he can churn out a whole lot of interesting-sounding ideas whilst actually telling the reader absolutely nothing of real interest at all. Perhaps I just miss his point; he makes a living writing whereas I don't so someone, somewhere must enjoy his fiction. Unfortunately, his 'After the Party' novella in three parts – although containing some interesting ideas – was populated by undeveloped characters and suffered as a consequence.

Graham Smith: My favourite story was 'Spheres'. I also liked '2+2=5', 'Karel's Prayer', 'Palestina', 'Summer's End', 'The New Chinese Wives'. As for the rest, most of them I could not get through. Many I would call obscure and pretentious – sorry to be uncomplimentary.

Chris Geeson: *Interzone* 206 was the best issue of IZ I've read – from the great cover art, to the best selection of stories I've come across in any magazine, ever. I enjoyed them all, but Chris Beckett's 'Karel's Prayer' was my absolute favourite of the year: a fascinating story full of twists and turns and laced with dark humour. More issues like 206 this year please!

Danny Milby: Thanks *Interzone* for another great year of stories and beautiful artwork.

Piet Wenings: This amounts to an increase in stories I liked last year and a stable number of stories I disliked. That can only mean that my input of last year was taken to heart and used as a key selection criteria ;-). Anyway, *Interzone* and I grow closer which is a good thing. Again no standout for me this year and two authors Elizabeth Bear and Jamie Barras appear in both of my lists. Not sure what that means. I know that Paul Di Filippo wrote more than a few stories I really liked, so these simply weren't for me. I've got to say that the layout and paper for issue 207 are a great improvement in my opinion. I found it easier to handle and easier to read. Keep up the improvements, I really appreciate the effort everyone involved puts into it.

David Marston: I'm glad that the magazine is now printed on matt paper but disappointed that you have abandoned the size and binding method of previous issues.

Derek Grubb: Love the matt finish, makes for easier night reading by lamp, new size is not a problem, keep up with the film and book reviews. I still think you should consider a DVD review column, though this may double up with the film reviews a second opinion is worthwhile and may provide some perspective between big screen and little screen release, as well as on films that do not make it to the big screen.

Rob Butler: Some very good stories this year with issue 202 exceptionally strong. 'Sundowner Sheila' was a particular favourite. Speaking as (probably) one of your more elderly readers I find white or coloured text on a black background very striking to look at, but very difficult to read!



Other writers' books say 'You can do it, if only you believe in yourself and follow these simple rules.' This book says 'You might do it, but you should know from the start that there really is, as you have always suspected, an intergalactic conspiracy of space-vampires, Freemasons and commissioning editors dedicated to keeping you in your place.'

If Ford Prefect wrote a writers' book, this is the one he'd write.

At last, a hip writers' book which doesn't insult its readers' intelligence. For the first time, a writers' book written by a writer, which would-be writers won't be embarrassed to be seen reading!

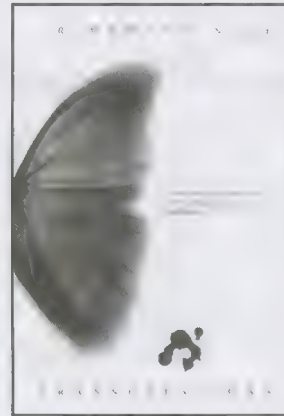
'If bursting into unstoppable fits of convulsive laughter – you know, when your bodily functions are seemingly controlled by some sadistic invisible force – is liable to embarrass you, do not read this book in public' **Tim Lebbon**



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- We continue to celebrate Interzone's 25 years with more personal reflections from contributors and readers
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rabble of defunct machinery softened and blurred. Heaps of old tractor tyres, baled straw bulging out of the Dutch barn; and something crouching on the concrete track, outside the gates. A big animal, far bigger than a fox or a badger. Tris levelled his gun and approached cautiously, fascinated. The creature had seen him. It tugged at the slack body it had been dragging: dropped the prey between mighty paws and raised its blunt dark head. He saw a pair of yellow eyes, staring directly at him: no threat, no hostility, more like pride. See what I brought you?

The kitchen door opened. Eval came piling out in his chair, followed by the little girl, Theo and Bel. The visitor fled. Tris ran for the gates, but he was too late. There was only Bodmin Moor, houseless and grey: the track disappearing into mist, and the carcass of a full-grown wolf, flopped on the concrete like an old horse-blanket.

"Did you see that?" demanded Tris. "Did you see it?"

Theo shook his head. "Didn't see anything."

"I dunno exac'ly *what* I saw," said Eval. "Couldn't make it out."

Tris and Bel examined the wolf. It was dead, no doubt of that, though there wasn't much blood, or obvious sign of injury. "I think it was suffocated," said Bel. "Brought down and held by the throat until it choked. My God. What should we do?"

"Better call the expert," suggested Eval, malignly. "Don't worry, I have a direct line. Should be able to get hold of him in an hour or so."

It took the wolf expert and his teenage sidekick thirty-six hours to get to Cornwall. They arrived at the scene on the second morning after the suspicious death, but by that time they were too late to examine the body. It had disappeared, overnight, from the chest freezer in the old dairy.

The farmer, the vet, and the cowman, were very apologetic, very eager to offer what evidence remained. They answered questions frankly. No, they never locked the dairy. But the freezer had been chained and padlocked: whoever had taken the wolf had used bolt cutters.

No, they hadn't heard anything.

No sound of a vehicle? No strange tyre tracks?

We'd have woken, said Bel, the vet. No one drives at night.

The thieves had left behind a plastic sheet that had been wrapped round the body.

It showed few traces: mud splatters and a couple of smears that were possibly blood. But Tris had taken photos, and printed the best of them. He fetched them from the farmhouse, snaps of a dun-pelted doglike creature: lying on the ground, tongue protruding between its teeth. A close-up of the tattoo. Another of the crushed throat – "The light wasn't good."

Fiorinda left them to it, and drifted off to wander the yard, picking her way between puddles of redolent slime. Maybe Smallstones farm looked better in spring or summer, or tastefully draped in snow. In November it breathed no romance. But the stones: hut circles, burial circles, one or two menhirs, were thick as dragon's teeth on this part of the Moor: so in fact you could look on Smallstones as a survivor of ancient prosperity, rather than a drab modern intrusion. She looked in on some brown calves penned in a shed. They nudged her hands to lick the salt from her palms, breathed silage and gazed sorrowfully at her red cowboy boots.

Soup of the evening, beautiful soup, she thought.

Tris and Bel examined the wolf. It was dead, no doubt of that, though there wasn't much blood, or obvious sign of injury

She was a city girl. Meeting food that looked you in the eye got her down. "All right, guilty as charged. But you are dairy calves."

The unfenced track outside the gates had been washed by rain since the incident, the ground on either side was mashed to bits by sheep feet. She felt a prickling between her shoulderblades, looked back and saw the white face of the little girl, staring avidly from an upstairs window.

The Lancoffes (Theo the cowman was Tris's cousin) came out of the dairy and crossed the puddle archipelago to join her. The wolf expert had to duck to get out of the door. "I wish we'd thought to cover the prints," said Tris. "They didn't come out in the photos, but when you saw them it was absolutely clear what they were –"

"Clear as print," confirmed Theo, too firmly. "It was a big cat."

Bel Lancoffe nodded. She was like her daughter, very white skin, very black hair: beautiful, in a pure, naked, windswept way, some years older than her husband. She didn't seem to like the red cowboy boots, or the vivid, ragged skirts of Fiorinda's indigo taffeta. Don't judge me, Cornish

person, thought Fiorinda. I dress like this as a statement. I have wellies, I know mud.

"What about Demi?" asked Sage. "She didn't hear anything?"

"Demzel's very shy," said Bel, stiffly.

"She was desperate to see you – er, I mean, both of you – but in the end it was just too overwhelming."

The white face at the window seemed like a kindred spirit. The fear and distaste of the adults was palpable. Ungrateful rural people, we are not plague carriers. We're the ones keeping the monsters from your door.

Well, except for this particular Bodmin monster, that kills our totem animal, delivers it like a gangster warning, and vanishes without a trace.

They drove onto the moor in convoy, Sage and Fiorinda in the National Rail hired van, Bel and Tris in the farm Land Rover. Sage walked with Tris off piste to a dell under the slopes of Small Tor, where a stream called the Vaughan came tumbling into a muddy-shored pool. "I found this today," said Tris, "after we'd discovered the body was gone –"

They squatted on their heels. Tris picked up the stones he'd used to anchor a square of plastic tarp, and peeled it back. Sage measured the crumbling pugmark with his ruined right hand. That's a *big* cat.

"Remind me. Have you had other big cat sightings around here?"

"I didn't believe in them until the day before yesterday," said Tris. "But I've never seen a wolf before, either, and we're in their range. We hear them occasionally, that's about all. I don't know, Steve. I just know I saw her."

It disturbed him to be called Steve. Stephen had been Sage's original name. Anyone who called him *Steve* had known him before the fickle finger of fate had singled out a gangling, mash-brained teen for corporate slavery and stupid wealth. He didn't like the vibes of uneasy respect, either. Tris Lancoffe should be the adult, Sage should be the crapulous junior.

When he looked up the moor was transformed by his angle of vision: the Vaughan's rocky cleft a Himalayan gorge: a sickle curlew winging over vast desert uplands. Small Tor's brown peak stood sentinel on the horizon.

"You said *she* on the phone, as well. How did you know it was a female?"

Tris rubbed the back of his head, displacing a battered huntin' shootin' fishin' flat cap. "I suppose Tom cats reckon what they kill is their own. It's she-cats, generally, that leave mice on the doormat for you. She wasn't hostile. It was exactly as if she'd killed a pest, and she wanted me to know it."

"Hm... Did you kill my wolf, Tris?"

The farmer faced those famous blue eyes bravely, head on. "The Bodmin wolves are a symbol," he said. "If we can live with them, at peace with them, we can live through this, this -"

"Global epiphany?"

"It's not global, is it? There are places where nothing's changed."

"Hard to say, at the moment."

The farmer's voice shook a little, the dread latent in him fighting his composure. "I'm saying, I grasp the iconography. It's smoke and mirrors, but it's all we have. I did not kill the wolf. We didn't kill the wolf."

"Okay."

Tris replaced the tarp. "It's as if we're in the hands of a psychopath. A justified

out of the high hedges. He had lost several fingers when he was a very small child. It wasn't usually a problem, but in cold and damp the ghosts could hurt like hell.

"It's amazing," he growled, "the number of righteous country folk who cheered their local hippies on, when the hippies sawed the masts down, and now genuinely don't understand why their cellphones don't work no more."

Fiorinda was curled in the far corner of the bench seat, her nose in a little book called *How Radio Really Works*. She ignored him.

"Why are you reading that? You *love* being unavailable. The only reason you've ever owned a mobile phone is for the fun of switching it off."

"Know thine enemy," said Fiorinda. "Also, I left my book on the train and this was the only item on sale at Bodmin Parkway, aside from the *Daily Mail*, two weeks old. Tell me about Tris Lancoffe. Who is he?"

"Someone we used to drink with. He wanted to be an architect, but he had to take over the family farm after his uncle died. They're Right Wing Greens: Bel's a

had been returned to captivity, another had been killed by a hit and run. Eleven of them should still be out there. Make it ten. The photos had definitely been *canis lupus*, and the tattoo seemed to confirm it was one of the released animals, not some other, mystery wolf.

"Virtual tourism is a futile excuse, since we've been quarantined from the dataworld. What about Bel and the little girl. I sensed a story there?"

"Hm, well, that's complicated -"

"Steamy tale of hideously dysfunctional North Cornwall folk?"

"Yes."

"I should move here," said Fiorinda. "I'd fit in wonderfully."

Sage looked at home right now. Ditched the rockstar apparel and the skull mask, just your average blond Cornish giant in a scuffed Barbour and old corduroys. But with this man you never knew which was the disguise. Chameleon, Corinthian, his masks went layers deep.

The lane crested a hill and opened up at a viewpoint. Sage pulled off and stopped the van: they got out and stared at the waste, Small Tor in the distance now; like a peaty alp. The raw cold took hold of them, and plastered them together. They'd been promised another severe winter: as far as anyone could tell, since they'd been robbed of the satellites, and that was bad news. It's tough keeping the people harmlessly off their faces and pogoing, when they're afraid that soon they won't have bread to eat.

"And that's another year-without-a-summer," grumbled Fiorinda.

"I told you about this long ago, brat. A third of the world fries, Western Europe gets sent to Siberia... Never thought it would really happen."

"We never thought anything would really happen. It's a rock and roll anger fantasy come true: save the earth, punish the rich. It's just unfortunate that to get to the rich you have to go through everyone else first—"

In his arms she was resistant, steely and fragile. "Fee, is this all right? Something wrong with this trip?"

"Nah. Trophy celeb-trash nymphette delighted to accompany you into your back pages, and get disapproved-of by your grown-up friends."

"Stupid brat. I need to know about the wolf, and I wanted to be alone with you, just for a day or two."

"I know, me too... What about Eval? Do I find out what really happened, now that I'm going to meet him?"

psychopath, someone who was pushed too far, driven mad. We have to be careful, that's all, do exactly what we're told, keep calm, and we'll be released. We'll be changed, but we'll have our lives back."

"Mm... What was the social occasion, last night?"

"Oh." Tris rubbed the back of his neck again. "We play cards. We've got a little poker school going. It's something to do."

Sage was taken aback. "You three play poker with *Eval*?"

"Not for money... I mean not for real money. I'm sorry you and Fiorinda had your journey for nothing. You were well on your way by the time we found the body was gone. We couldn't reach you."

"It wasn't for nothing. We're going to Eval's, see what he can tell us."

.....
The van had no clearance and its suspension was in an awful state. They took the long way round by road, rather than cross the Moor. The Cornish lanes were deep and narrow, the asphalt rugged with fissures. Sage clutched the wheel with his crippled hands, and wondered which fist he should use, should fuel hijackers leap

churchgoer, Pagan-tendency Anglican I do b'lieve." Sage glanced across, a reassuring bolt of blue. "But nothing screwy. No extreme views." He took one hand from the wheel, and attempted to flex the surviving fingers, without success. "When he called me, I told him to put my wolf in the freezer, and he said *I'll try*. What d'you think he meant by that?"

"Perhaps he didn't want to chuck his stash of supermarket ice-cream. It's not your wolf, Sage. It's a wolf sprung from Whipsnade Wild Animal Park by lunatics, later adopted as a daft eco-initiative. You're not responsible."

"Yes I am, brat. I'm the one who convinced the Lords of the Manor -"

"Heeheehee."

"Fuck off, on Bodmin it means something. I convinced them to take the wolves on. The old-style profit gods rationale says virtual tourism, hygienic disposal of barren old ewes. Everyone knows they're a peace offering to the angry Environment, and now one of them's dead in mysterious circs -"

Thirteen wolves had been released on Bodmin. One had proved a nuisance and

Eval Jackson had quit Sage's band, among rumours of appalling debauchery, several years before; and returned to Cornwall in permanent ill health. His bandmates had consistently refused to comment on the lurid stories he told of his dismissal. Whatever the man says.

We know nothing.

Far as we're concerned Ev popped out for a fag a few years ago, and never came back.

Sage heaved a sigh. "I suppose. Tho' George will kill me. It's only different in the details. We were in Kampala, on that hateful Africa tour –"

"Mba Kayere."

"Yeah. Some rich kid had invited us to a party, nobody wanted to go except Eval, so he went on his own. He was driving round leafy suburbs in the middle of the night, looking for the address. Of course he was hammered. He bust through a roadblock, they shot out his tyres and he totalled the jeep. I was so drunk all the time then, I don't remember a thing; but George had him in a top Cairo hospital in hours. He lived, he now has one kidney, previously owned, no spleen, and a mashed spine."

George was the sensible one: the crazed blond giant's grand vizier.

"No hostage shoot-out, no lies about who was driving? No brutal sacking, no AIDS-related prank with infected hos planted in his bed; no horrific blood-parasite disease due to you cancelling his insurance and forcing him to rely on shanty town healthcare?"

"There had been talk of sacking. None of the rest, not s'far as I know."

But you were captain of that ship, she thought. That's bound to smart.

"I suppose he knows about me and Rufus?"

"Er, yeah. Don't worry, he won't say anything. He better not."

"I don't mind. I'm used to it." She dug his hands from under her rainjacket and held them to the warmth of her throat. "Let's get on. And I'm driving, imbecile."

He hung his head. "Not arguing... Listen, d'you hear an engine?"

"Nah," said Fiorinda. "It's the baying of an enormous hound."

"That was Dartmoor."

.....
Eval's place was a designer pad: probably with stunning views if you arrived by daylight. Outside in the landscaped grounds there were exotic trees that must have been planted full grown in the band's filthy rich phase; and a marble pillared

portico. Inside, a slaughter of tropical hardwoods, a massacre of beautiful stone, native and foreign. Fiorinda thought of Sage's treasured, unreconstructed hovel of a cottage, not too many miles from here. Eval must have drawn the short straw: Band Member Who Does The Taste Free Spinal Tap Thing... She pretended to read her Wireless pamphlet, while Sage and Eval surfed the *Wolfwatch* cams. The invalid was a hobbyist voyeur. He had a fly-eye bank of screens covering a wall, and a wifimixing desk.

Eval wore a soft, brown hippie beard, a guernsey sweater and painfully box-fresh dark blue jeans. His feet were bare, soft and pale like his hands: his eyes were restless. Sage questioned the witness gently. He knew that the dead wolf had disappeared, but he had no explanation. He had not seen Tris's big cat. It had been dark, he'd seen nothing, really.

"D'you often watch the wolves?"

"There's not much else, is there? I'm sick of reruns, I hate movies an' I don't give a fuck for the bloody revolution. I very rarely see them, though."

Out on the Moor, in false-coloured, papery infrared, nothing stirred except reeds in the wind; the glint of moving water

The living room was scarred by the traces of wheelchair adaption, which Eval had not troubled to have erased. A white Steinway Concert Grand, piled with old food cartons. A heap of keyboards and a steel guitar, legless on a dais. Stuffed bin-bags oozed from the showpiece Serpentine hearth. A plasma wallscreen idled around an underground garage full of mangled sports cars. Was that art, or the CCTV from Eval's basement?

Out on the Moor, in false-coloured, papery infrared, nothing stirred except reeds in the wind; the glint of moving water.

"They know where all the cams are," murmured Eval, his restless eyes quieted by admiration, or affection. "They're wise to us, they don't get caught unless they like –"

"What about the big cat?" asked Sage, equally quiet, as if the secretive wildlife could hear them. "Did you ever have a glimpse of her?"

"There are no big cats on Bodmin," said Eval, levelly, staring at the fly-eye. "If there'd've been a whisker of another charismatic predator, you'd never have got the wolves released, would yer? Forget it."

"Then what killed my wolf, Ev?"

"Hit and run. It's obvious. The culprit dumped it at Smallstones gates, and made a few stupid howling noises, for a laugh."

"So you did *hear* something. Where d'you think the wolf is now?"

The invalid glanced across at Fiorinda, delicate skin reddening above the beard. "Is this a fucking court of law? I'll tell you what happened: Tris has kept it. A wolf pelt, that'd be a cool thing. He called you 'cos he was scared he'd be blamed, then he changed his mind an' decided to keep it. Made Bel an' Theo lie for him. I'm not surprised. He's in a state, you know. He's been behaving erratically before this –"

"Tris speaks well of you too," said Sage. "He told me about the poker."

Eval glared: apparently this opened an old wound. He spun his wheels and turned on Fiorinda. "You're Rufus O'Niall's daughter, aren't you? How old are you now, kiddiewink? Still jailbait or just over?"

"If you don't know," she said, coolly, "you can easily find out."

Sage laughed. "Don't bother, Ev. You're not up to her weight."

"I just wondered, because it's not like the

boss here to take another man's leavings, even if it was her own dad broke her in."

"You don't know that," said Fiorinda. "It's just jealous gossip, because my dad's been a megastar and I'm incredibly talented."

Sage grinned at her, and silently gave her the thumbs up.

"I'll make tea," said Eval, rancorous, dark flushed to his brow. "Sorry, I don't keep alcohol. An' I don't need any help, thanks."

"Nice friends you have," she said, when Eval's chair had zipped out of the huge living room. "Is that normal?"

"Er, yeah... On the stressed-out end of his range."

"What d'you think's wrong? Guilty conscience?"

"I'm not sure. Could be just he's having a painful day."

Eval returned calmer, the mugs of tea on a tray attached to his chair, mineral water with a straw for himself. They sat like a misfit family on a sitcom sofa, awkwardly silent until another screen in the bank woke. A dot moved through the dusk, pushing light ahead of it: someone was coming up the lane on a moped. "Ah," said Eval. "That's one of my care-givers. She'd like to meet

you, Fiorinda, she's a big fan: hope you don't mind. She's bringing our supper." He grinned at Sage. "Don't worry. I ordered fingerfood, Mr Handsfree: you won't have to embarrass yerself with a knife and fork."

The care-giver wore clerical black under a homely red anorak; a dog collar and a crucifix. The figure on the cross was the Green Man. She greeted Sage as a fellow-soldier on this difficult battlefield, smiled shyly at Fiorinda; and gave Eval a cautious, mood-checking glance, as she stripped the hotbag from three pizza boxes.

"I'm truly honoured to meet you Ms Slater. I'm Moira. I hope you don't mind me inviting myself: Sage and I are old comrades. How are you Eval?" She added a two litre plastic bottle to the spread, purporting to hold Coca-Cola. "It always cheers him up when one of the band comes down –"

"They're not here to see me," said Eval. "They're psychic investigators."

"Oh?" The vicar's smile grew wary.

"What are you investigating?"

Eval bared his teeth, rancour suddenly breaking into irrational fury. "It's the big

"There is NO EXCUSE for that language! SIT DOWN!"

And the storm passed as abruptly as it had exploded. Eval subsided, hiding his eyes. "I'm sorry, vicar... I'm very tired." He was trembling.

The pizza wasn't bad, though the 'mozzarella' had an unpleasant, gagging texture. Sage stayed with Eval while Reverend Moira and Fiorinda cleared out. "I am a Christian Pagan," said the vicar, with dignity. "There is nothing incompatible in Christ's message and our older forms of worship. Paganism has nothing to do with black magic." She closed her hand protectively over the Green Man at her breast. "What happened in the Midlands was not my religion, it was pure human evil, the hideous consequence of, of our breakdown, our loss of control –"

"You're right," said Fiorinda. "There was nothing supernatural going on, just street kids killed by slow torture as a spectacle. We can agree on that."

Eval's kitchen was a well-tended temple of shiny gadgets, spotless surfaces, but the

that he can't eat. I sometimes think the poor man wants to commit suicide by drowning in a midden of food packaging and junk mail."

"What the fuck's going to become of me?"

In the master bedroom Eval propped his head in his hands and wept. "What's gonna become of people like me when the medicine drugs run out, and the shit really hits the fan? I'll be crawling, a legless beggar."

"You're just tired. Let's get you into bed."

Sage and Eval Jackson had been heroin addicts together once: along with Mary, the Welshwoman, Sage's first girlfriend. Sage had been free of the drug before they set out on *Mba Kayere*, he'd decided to kill himself with alcohol instead. Eval had not escaped, and it looked as if he never would, although plain morphine was his poison these days. You won't be a legless beggar, Ev. You need health and strength for that life, you poor bastard. It's incredible that you've clung on, and for what? To hate yourself some more? Is that the last, most potent addiction? He laid out the bedtime dose, without which Eval would have no rest, and stooped over the pathetic figure, using his height and bulk with menace.

"Say another word to her about her dad, and I will kill you."

"I can put meself to bed," mumbled Eval, ignoring the threat. "How d'you think I manage when my beloved bandmates aren't around? I don't need you."

But he did. They had never really liked each other, yet the memories remain: the needle applied like a benediction to the soft, slack blue-veined flesh in the crook of Eval's arm. Goodnight, me old hellraiser.

Now to disable the spycam in the guest room, just in case.

Mba Kayere.

He was in Africa, on stage in a sweltering arena: the crowd a surging mass out in the dark. He was chanting 'Lukundoo', a song about a wicked man, wickedly punished: words filched and filleted from a revered Horror story. Reference to certain treasured texts was part of their Ideology. *Mba Kayere, I am passed over.* We are the survivors, living on after the death of the living world. We are worse than dead. They had hecatombs of fans in the sub-Sahel, hordes who passionately welcomed the message of despair: hordes more just delirious on the special effects. He was Aoxomoxoa, the skull-head demon,

cat. Tris told them a big cat killed that wolf, an' now the wolf's body has disappeared. So this makes them think, don't ask me why, that we're getting into ritual magic, like the human sacrifice raves in the Midlands. Better come clean, Reverend, or they'll have the army down here –"

"Oh dear. Eval, don't get into a state, it does you harm –"

Eval reared up, arms braced and trembling, spittle around his mouth. "Do I look as if I've been dancing round any bonfires lately! Tell me that!"

"Siddown, Eval. I don't know where this is coming from. I'm here because a wolf was killed. Nobody said anything about bonfires."

"Don't you fucking lie to me. I know why you came rushing down. I know what a WITCHHUNT is! Your shitting prejudice, the ruling junta, you, and His Holy Cocksucking Self Mr Dictator Ax Preston. All you want is to destroy the real revolution, the real radicals. Things you can't control, they're not allowed to exist, well you'll get yours, you'll be fucking sorry –"

"EVAL!" bawled Reverend Moira.

invalid's despair was fighting back. A heap of microwave popcorn bags tumbled from behind the Espresso machine, giving off a smell of rancid butter. The vicar nodded, still clinging to her talisman.

"I believe your grandmother is a practising Wiccan witch, Ms Slater?"

"Fiorinda," said Fiorinda. "She doesn't practise while I'm around."

"No, I suppose not... Ms Slater, er Fiorinda, Eval has his outbursts. He tires easily, he's often in a lot of pain. Sage understands, I hope you do too. But there are many, reasonable people who feel the Rock and Roll Reich is prejudiced against Pagans –"

"Not at all. Just a little suspicious of the extreme right wing."

"I can't blame you for that." The priest, or priestess, seemed to reach a decision. "I'll see what I can find out about the wolf. If it would help."

"To make us go away?"

"To...to clear up a misunderstanding. Now, if we could move some of the rubbish bags out to the bins while Sage distracts Eval, I'd be grateful. It's difficult to get them past him. He keeps ordering takeaways

razoring swollen, gibber-headed lesions from the bruised inner skin of his arms. But however deep he cut the root was further, and he was terrified: not of cutting through bone, not of bleeding to death, but that this would never stop, never stop. A bone-rattling horror of the void *inside him* –

SHE WILL NEVR FORGIVE. It was the horror of knowing that *nothing* can make the world better. The razor cuts deeper, finding no end to the rot; the void inside expanding, expanding. No earthly medicine, no cure –

Matomipa, angunzi, lukundoo, lukundoo – He sat up, sweat bursting.

The skin of his arms was unblemished. The room was vivid with African moonlight, and *there was someone in the bed with him*. He stared, appalled at the young woman, her flower face, pointed chin resting on her hand, her grave eyes, the red storm of her hair –

“That looked like a mighty struggle. Was it worth it?”

“What?”

“Remembering my name,” said Fiorinda.

“Oh, fuck. I was dreaming.”

“I know,” she said, dryly. “Was it about Mary?”

He shook his head. “I’ve given that up, sweetheart. It was about me. I was onstage, razoring ulcers from my arms, singing ‘Lukundoo’. God, I’ve just remembered what it means.”

The bones of his face, stark and beautiful, stood out as if he was wearing the skull mask, a white skull with staring blue eyes.

“What *does* it mean? I know what *Mba Kayere* means, it comes from Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*: which I read when I was eleven thanks to you, and it nearly killed me... I can’t remember *all* your crypto-intellectual footnotes.”

Fiorinda had been a preteen fan, long before she met her idol.

“It’s supposed to be African,” he said.

“Don’t ask me what language, maybe Edward Lucas White, guy who wrote the story, made it up. It’s supposed to mean a leopard man. Leopard men are witches. Shit –” He stared harder. “I was fusing with it, I was turning into a leopard!”

“Makes a change from *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” said Fiorinda. “Where the horrific fusion was between profit gods and hard science. Sage, why didn’t you tell me Eval had a Pagan vicar for a health visitor?”

He noticed that the light was not moonlight, it was the electric bedside lamp. Eval had a turbine, and unrestricted

use of the power he generated.

“Why would I mention it? Half the Anglican priests in the South West are Pagans by now. What are you saying, Fee? D’you think we’ve blundered, stumbled onto another human sacrifice ring?”

She wrapped her arms around her knees, and thought about it.

“No, I don’t. But there’s something going on.”

“There’s something,” he agreed: and wiped the cooling sweat of Africa, the past invading the present. “I was so *angry* in those days. It wasn’t an act, it was unstoppable: anger and hatred and despair flooding out of me, all over the stage. And now, in the middle of the disaster I knew we had coming, that I was screaming for, I do the same show and it’s just a job. Isn’t that weird?”

“Crowd control,” said Fiorinda. “Bread and circuses, and fear of the guillotine. Us being the circus. It works, but how long can we keep it up?”

“Long enough.” He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer, Fiorinda in her slip of a green silk nightdress. How

But living with fear was an art she had mastered. Needs must.

.....
Eval’s daily care-givers arrived in a constant procession. The nurse who got him up in the morning; the housekeeper, the cook, the cleaners; the masseur. The aquatherapist (there was a spa in the basement: no dead sports cars). The local geek who ran the voyeur network, the noble volunteers who came just to spend time with a fretful invalid. It was heartening, the other face of that wild rumpus over which they presided: but alarming to see how much care and commitment one sick man could absorb.

Sage decided to overhaul the keyboards’ programming, and coaxed Eval into taking an interest. In the afternoon, when the rain stopped, Fiorinda went for a walk in the grounds. She was lurking among the Japanese maples by the drive when a 4x4 minibus arrived. As it went past she glimpsed the Pagan vicar in the driver’s seat.

When she reached the house, Eval was out on the marble forecourt, at the top of the wheelchair ramp that had been crudely

The bones of his face, stark and beautiful, stood out as if he was wearing the skull mask, a white skull with staring blue eyes

often had they seen her naked? Not very often. The abused child fears exposure.

“We’ll hold the pass,” he said. “The quarantine will be lifted. We’ll come out of this with an improved, sustainable version of modern civilisation. I just wish I knew what had happened to that wolf... Ah, let’s fuck on it.”

“Like sleep on it, only better. Good idea.”

They’d been thrilled at the thought of being alone, but it was sweet the way sex seemed incomplete without their lover. Think of him, fall asleep.

.....
Something was being dragged, laboriously, over uneven ground. It was dragging itself, it was not a dead wolf but the torso of a man: severed below the waist but still living. His head lolled, the face a mask of blood. Was that Eval, crawling to the place of sacrifice? Bog bodies, stone circles, the heroes tortured to death, the unfit kept, tended until they were needed for the great appeasement. Rituals not ancient but newborn. Fiorinda stirred from her doze, very frightened: Sage gone out of her reach, a breathing rock. It was *impossible* to wake him when he was really asleep.

slashed through the steps: arguing with the Reverend Moira. Sage was letting them get on with it.

“You couldn’t get up the path, Eval, and Sage is here, but you won’t stand for anyone carrying you. We’d have to leave you in the bus.”

“You take me, or I’ll tell them!” Eval’s voice cracked with fury, and desolate defiance. “I’ll tell them everything, and you’ll be f—”

“Eval, I won’t be blackmailed.”

“What will you tell us?” asked Fiorinda.

The invalid stared at the vicar, narrow-eyed. “Stuff I know.”

“Ev’s got his all-terrain chair,” said Sage. “Why can’t he come along?”

“There’s nothing to tell,” sighed the Reverend Moira, shaking her head, hanging onto her dignity. “Eval’s being silly. But if he really must –”

“I’m getting my other chair: it’s charged. Don’t you go without me.” Eval belted into the house, radiant as a toddler after a successful tantrum.

“If there’s nothing to tell,” wondered Fiorinda, “where are we going?”

“It’s the other side of Small Tor.” Reverend

Moira looked at Sage. "Sage will know the place, it's the old Methodist Chapel."

They took the lanes, long way round again. Reverend Moira was a cautious driver, barely breaking into twenty miles an hour on the straight. Sage travelled up front, Fiorinda and Eval in the back, seats folded away and Eval's chair installed. Eval fell asleep: lulled by the gentle motion.

"This is one of those new Pagan Holy Places, I take it?" remarked the native son. "How do the Methodists feel? I thought you people of the leafy cross didn't get on with them?"

"Not new," Moira corrected him. "The sacred places were always there. We find them more easily now – or again – because we have changed."

She drew up in a gravelled parking lot on the eastern slopes of the Tor. The chapel was out of sight: a green turf track led up the hill, dividing rusty sheaves of bracken, blue-green mats of juniper. Moira closed her eyes and opened her hands, palms upward.

"Let us be quiet for a moment, before we approach. There is nothing evil here. Let the

Saturday, I'd hate to disappoint the fans –"

"Same here," said Fiorinda, mugging teenage sidekick attitude. "Me, done the end of the world. Boring."

Moira didn't let their levity get to her. "Nothing like that. Nothing at all like that."

Eval was waiting for them at the grave-plot wall. The vicar drew herself up, and came clean. "Well, here we are. I don't know how the wolf was killed... Perhaps I can persuade you not to pursue that question. All I can tell you is that after Tris had spoken with you, other parishioners of mine took a hand: they tried to make amends. I'll wait for you here. Go into the enclosure, see what you came to see."

The chapel stood pale and foursquare, in the last light of day. Sage felt no threat. But his skin pricked, the inner surfaces of his arms suddenly tender, as if the nightmare was lodged in him and finding its way to the surface. Sage looked at Fiorinda: she shook her head and shrugged –

"Go under the trees," urged Moira. "They will do you no harm."

They?

"Eval? You coming? Need a lift up the

peace of the earth rise up in your hearts."

"Why didn't you want poor old Eval to come along?" inquired Sage, in a church-going undertone. "Don't he need the peace an' all that?"

"Hope is not good for some people," explained the vicar, seriously, opening her eyes. "Some kinds of hope are not good for any of us."

Eval woke when the vicar came around and opened the side door. His mood had changed: he was subdued, uneasy. They followed him up the green track, around a bracken shoulder and saw the chapel pressed close against the hillside. It was surrounded by a walled grave plot, where a yew hunched and a clump of sycamores held onto their last, tattered, yellow leaves. Not another building in sight.

Fiorinda thought of rabid Pagans in ambush. "Is the chapel in use?"

"Occasionally. The grave plot is kept up, and someone comes to clean every month. No services are disturbed by our worship."

"So what happens, ex'actly?" Sage grinned. "If this is where we get rapturised up to heaven, with the Methodists elect, you can count me out. I've got a gig on

steps?"

The stones looked over the wall, marking the ranks of the dead. Eval's face worked with hunger and grief, his soft hands balled into trembling fists.

"Nah. No fucking thanks, cocksucker. This is close enough."

"I'll wait with Eval," said the vicar.

Sage and Fiorinda went into the plot alone, and picked their way between gravestones. Under the wind-sown sycamores they found the wolf: not buried, but laid on top of a table tomb. It was significantly deader than it had been in Tris Lancoffe's snapshots: eyes sunken in the skull, the soft lips and tongue shrunken back from its formidable teeth. Whoever had laid it there had made a bed of grasses on the stone, and arranged the body as if it were sleeping. There were mourning flowers, a pot of autumn cyclamen, but also a dog's waterbowl and a plate of raw meat (beginning to fester a little); in case the sleeper awoke.

"Oh dear," breathed Fiorinda. "We are put to shame, Sage. I believe they were hoping it would come back to life."

"Yeah... Prob'ly the same lads that

knocked him over, I think that's what the vicar was saying." He parted the fur of the dead animal's ruff, found the tattoo and stood back from the smell of decay. "Looks like sometimes the Goddess says no."

"Pagans, not Goddess worshippers. It's not the same."

It was twilight now, a witching time, a crossing time. The wolf's resting place definitely had an atmosphere, and now they saw other votives: tucked between stones, into clefts in the sycamore roots. The pathos of human longing filled them: let the bad thing not have happened, make my baby well; let us have our peacemaker the Bodmin Wolf back –

But what's dead stays dead.

Yellow leaves reached to touch their shoulders, as they left. Sage stooped to get from under the branches, Fiorinda pushed clinging twigs aside. The hunched yew tree by the corner of the chapel seemed to have changed perspective: surely it was closer, and at a different angle? A trick of the light, obviously. They crossed one terrace, and Sage heard a very deep, murmuring and rending sound behind him. Fiorinda turned, uncertainly, as if someone had called her name.

Oh, what's this?

The yew and the sycamores were *walking*.

Like tall women wading in the earth, reaching out their arms.

The walking trees, the stones, the grass, the darkened sky, a veil grown thin, a rent that briefly opened, and behind it NOTHING.

NO THING. ANNIHILATION.

Fiorinda stared, her grey eyes wildly dilated. "No," she said. "Stop it."

And all was as before.

Eval watched them approach, ground his chair in a snarling turn and bounded down the track. Moira stayed, paper-white. The Green Man, arms outstretched, leaves in his mouth and tangled in his hair, shone on her breast.

Her lips moved, stiffly. "Did you see...?" she breathed

"We saw that you folks have laid the wolf in a holy place," said Sage. "Fine by us. Thanks for bringing us here. Case is closed, shall we go?"

The minibus purred at the chastened pace of motor-powered transport after the fall. Its headlamps sought and found detail in the dusk: a tendril of red-berried bryony, a darting bird between the high banks. Small Tor dominated them through

every twist and turn, cutting off the last of the light. They reached the designer pad, and Eval's marble sweep, in unbroken silence. Moira lowered the floor of the bus: the invalid, defeated, zoomed up the ramp and into the house.

"He thought he would be healed there," said the vicar, regretfully. "That's why I didn't want to take him. I knew he would be disappointed. There *have* been healings at that spot: but Eval must heal himself, before divine power can touch him... Will you understand me if I say that we have visited one of those places where the veil is thin?"

They smiled and nodded: polite sceptics. "I won't ask what you both saw." The Reverend Moira had recovered her colour and her self-command. She looked carefully at Fiorinda, in the bright lights of Eval's threshold. "I'm not sure what I saw myself... But I'm not impressed by strange phenomena. The truth is deeper, and different for every soul. It lives in the silence of our hearts."

"You're absolutely right. Nice meeting you. Goodnight."

The witch's grand-daughter went quickly indoors.

Reverend Moira got back into the 4x4, and leaned from the window. "Goodnight, Sage. I hope you found what you were looking for."

So this is what we will do, thought Fiorinda, as they headed for Bodmin Parkway, the designer rockstar pad and the mystery of the Methodist Chapel safely behind them. Sage and I will ride shotgun, keeping things worse than mere anarchy at bay. We'll hear of incidents and travel around investigating. Sometimes it will be horrors, the way it was in the Midlands; sometimes it will be something else. But we will mend the rents, scrub out the stains. It sounded doable. She hoped it was true – "Fee, d'you mind if we stop?"

They'd reached the viewpoint. She pulled up, and faced him. "What's the matter?"

She could trust Sage to keep her secrets, she knew that.

"Nothing at all, sweetheart. I'd just like to walk on the moor. Don't know when I'm going to be here again, as thank God it won't be my turn to visit Eval for about a year. Or two."

(Will he still be alive? Where will we be? Who knows...)

"D'you want me to come?"

"No, thanks. Commune with beloved homeland alone, me."

"Okay. I'm still trying to find out how wireless works. Take your time."

"Perfect girl."

He skirted around Smallstones, keeping below the horizon, a British Army balaclava covering his bright hair; a dun shadow in the colourless daylight. The square of tarp was still weighted down, by the pool. Stepping lightly from dry grass to dry stones he crouched and peeled it back. He'd noticed something wrong when Tris had brought him here, but hadn't put it together. Yep, this pugmark is *old*. Not a day or two, but a week or two old, it's been wet and dry, it's had time to crumble. The inexplicable took him by the back of the neck: making the hairs rise, sending chills down his spine.

Oops, and now it's gone.

Having destroyed the evidence he replaced the tarp, and climbed beside the Vaughan. Up the gully, across a steep stretch of open moor, and up again, vertically: keeping close to the stream, treading and gripping only where the rock was water-washed, using his crippled hands like paws. What told him when to stop? A musk, a band of signal hanging in the air. Overhead, near the top of the scarp, he saw a dark slot under a precarious-looking boulder. He turned his back and leaned there, tucking his fists away.

"I know you're up there," he said, conversationally. "I know you took the wolf, an' I think I know why. I won't tell on you. I don't know what you want with *me* but... Try to live with my wolves. Please. Is it a deal?"

No answer. A leaf fell with a tiny sigh. A pair of peregrines, far off and high in the pale sky, mewed at each other. He stood for a while, for minutes, forever: thinking of the void inside, and the moment in his dream when fear had turned to longing. *Hiraeth*: a word that Mary had taught him. Then he returned, same way as he'd come, to the rust-bucket van: to his brat, her courage and her secrets. Back to London, where Mr Preston was waiting, with all his faithful love, all his stubborn belief that the world could be saved.

The big cat, up above in her den, stretched and yawned, well content. Her eyes were fathomless light, her throat a fanged abyss. She curled the black length of her body around the cub and set about him, licking with her coarse tongue, and purring, soft and deep.

Tough love, rough love, shaping a dark destiny. ▣



Alastair Reynolds was born in Wales in 1966, spent his student years in Newcastle ('The Sledge-Maker's Daughter' is the second story of his to be set in that city) and is now living in the Netherlands where he writes full-time. He's recently published two story collections, and his next novel, *The Prefect*, is out in April.



Jesse Speak is something of a nomad who has lived and worked in quite a few different countries. He currently lives in Ireland with his wife.

THE SLEDGE-MAKER'S DAUGHTER by ALASTAIR REYNOLDS illustrated by JESSE SPEAK

She stopped in sight of Twenty Arch Bridge, laying down her bags to rest her hands from the weight of two hogs' heads and forty pence worth of beeswax candles. While she paused, Kathrin adjusted the drawstring on her hat, tilting the brim to shade her forehead from the sun. Though the air was still cool, there was a fierce new quality to the light that brought out her freckles.

Kathrin moved to continue, but a tightness in her throat made her hesitate. She had been keeping the bridge from her thoughts until this moment, but now the fact of it could not be ignored. Unless she crossed it she would face the long trudge to New Bridge, a diversion that would keep her on the road until long after sunset.

"Sledge-maker's daughter!" called a rough voice from across the road.

Kathrin turned sharply at the sound. An aproned man stood in a doorway, smearing his hands dry. He had a monkeylike face, tanned a deep liverish red, with white sideboards and a gleaming pink tonsure.

"Brendan Lynch's daughter, isn't it?"

She nodded meekly, but bit her lip rather than answer.

"Thought so. Hardly one to forget a pretty face, me." The man beckoned her to the doorway of his shop. "Come here, lass. I've something for your father."

"Sir?"

"I was hoping to visit him last week, but work kept me here." He cocked his head

at the painted wooden trademark hanging above the doorway. "Peter Rigby, the wheelwright. Kathrin, isn't it?"

"I need to be getting along, sir..."

"And your father needs good wood, of which I've plenty. Come inside for a moment, instead of standing there like a starved thing." He called over his shoulder, telling his wife to put the water on the fire.

Reluctantly Kathrin gathered her bags and followed Peter into his workshop. She blinked against the dusty air and removed her hat. Sawdust carpeted the floor, fine and golden in places, crisp and coiled in others, while a heady concoction of resins and glues filled the air. Pots simmered on fires. Wood was being steamed into curves, or straightened where it was curved. Many sharp tools gleamed on one wall, some of them fashioned with blades of skydrift. Wheels, mostly awaiting spokes or iron tyres, rested against another. Had the wheels been sledges, it could have been her father's workshop, when he had been busier.

Peter showed Kathrin to an empty stool next to one of his benches. "Sit down here and take the weight off your feet. Mary can make you some bread and cheese. Or bread and ham if you'd rather."

"That's kind sir, but Widow Grayling normally gives me something to eat, when I reach her house."

Peter raised a white eyebrow. He stood by the bench with his thumbs tucked into the belt of his apron, his belly jutting out as

if he was quietly proud of it. "I didn't know you visited the witch."

"She will have her two hogs' heads, once a month, and her candles. She only buys them from the Shield, not the Town. She pays for the hogs a year in advance, twenty four whole pounds."

"And you're not scared by her?"

"I've no cause to be."

"There's some that would disagree with you."

Remembering something her father had told her, Kathrin said, "There are folk who say the sheriff can fly, or that there was once a bridge that winked at travellers like an eye, or a road of iron that reached all the way to London. My father says there's no reason for anyone to be scared of Widow Grayling."

"Not afraid she'll turn you into a toad, then?"

"She cures people, not put spells on them."

"When she's in the mood for it. From what I've heard she's just as likely to turn the sick and needy away."

"If she helps some people, isn't that better than nothing at all?"

"I suppose." She could tell Peter didn't agree, but he wasn't cross with her for arguing. "What does your father make of you visiting the witch, anyway?"

"He doesn't mind."

"No?" Peter asked, interestedly.

"When he was small, my dad cut his

arm on a piece of skydrift that he found in the snow. He went to Widow Grayling and she made his arm better again by tying an eel around it. She didn't take any payment except the skydrift."

"Does your father still believe an eel can heal a wound?"

"He says he'll believe anything if it gets the job done."

"Wise man, that Brendan, a man after my own heart. Which reminds me." Peter ambled to another bench, pausing to stir one of his bubbling pots before gathering a bundle of sawn-off wooden sticks. He set them down in front of Kathrin on a scrap of cloth. "Off cuts," he explained. "But good seasoned beech, which'll never warp. No use to me, but I am sure your father will find use for them. Tell him that there's more, if he wishes to collect it."

"I haven't got any money for wood."

"I'd take none. Your father was always generous to me, when I was going through lean times." Peter scratched behind his ear. "Only fair, the way I see it."

"Thank you," Kathrin said doubtfully.

"But I don't think I can carry the wood all the way home."

"Not with two hogs' heads as well. But you can drop by when you've given the heads to Widow Grayling."

"Only I won't be coming back over the river," Kathrin said. "After I've crossed Twenty Arch Bridge, I'll go back along the south quayside and take the ferry at Jarrow."

Peter looked puzzled. "Why line the ferryman's pocket when you can cross the bridge for nowt?"

Kathrin shrugged easily. "I've got to visit someone on the Jarrow road, to settle an account."

"Then you'd better take the wood now, I suppose," Peter said.

Mary bustled in, carrying a small wooden tray laden with bread and ham. She was as plump and red as her husband, only shorter. Picking up the entire gist of the conversation in an instant, she said, "Don't be an oaf, Peter. The girl cannot carry all that wood *and* her bags. If she will not come back this way, she must pass a message on to her father. Tell him that there's wood here if he wants it." She shook her head sympathetically at Kathrin. "What does he think you are, a pack mule?"

"I'll tell my father about the wood," she said.

"Seasoned beech," Peter said emphatically. "Remember that."

"I will."

Mary encouraged her to take some of the bread and meat, despite Kathrin again mentioning that she expected to be fed at Widow Grayling's. "Take it anyway," Mary said. "You never know how hungry you might get on the way home. Are you sure about not coming back this way?"

"I'd best not," Kathrin said.

After an awkward lull, Peter said, "There is something else I meant to tell your father. Could you let him know that I've no need of a new sledge this year, after all?"

"Peter," Mary said. "You promised."

"I said that I should *probably* need one. I was wrong in that." Peter looked exasperated. "The fault lies in Brendan, not me! If he did not make such good and solid sledges, then perhaps I should need another by now."

"I shall tell him," Kathrin said.

"Is your father keeping busy?" Mary asked.

"Aye," Kathrin answered, hoping the wheelwright's wife wouldn't push her on the point.

"Of course he will still be busy," Peter said, helping himself to some of the bread. "People don't stop needing sledges, just because the Great Winter loosens its hold on us. Any more than they stopped needing wheels when the winter was at its coldest. It's still cold for half the year!"

Kathrin opened her mouth to speak. She meant to tell Peter that he could pass the message onto her father directly, for he was working not five minutes walk from the wheelwright's shop. Peter clearly had no knowledge that her father had left the village, leaving his workshop empty during these warming months. But she realised that her father would be ashamed if the wheelwright were to learn of his present trade. It was best that nothing be said.

"Kathrin?" Peter asked.

"I should be getting on. Thank you for the food, and the offer of the wood."

"You pass our regards on to your father," Mary said.

"I shall."

"God go with you. Watch out for the jangling men."

"I will," Kathrin replied, because that was what you were supposed to say.

"Before you go," Peter said suddenly, as if a point had just occurred to him. "Let me tell you something. You say there are people who believe the sheriff can fly, as if that was a foolish thing, like the iron road and the winking bridge. I cannot speak of the other things, but when I was boy I met

someone who had seen the sheriff's flying machine. My grandfather often spoke of it. A whirling thing, like a windmill made of tin. He had seen it when he was a boy, carrying the sheriff and his men above the land faster than any bird."

"If the sheriff could fly then, why does he need a horse and carriage now?"

"Because the flying machine crashed down to Earth, and no tradesman could persuade it to fly again. It was a thing of the old world, before the Great Winter. Perhaps the winking bridge and the iron road were also things of the old world. We mock too easily, as if we understood everything of our world where our forebears understood nothing."

"But if I should believe in certain things," Kathrin said, "should I not also believe in others? If the sheriff can fly, then can a jangling man not steal me from my bed at night?"

"The jangling men are a story to stop children misbehaving," Peter said witheringly. "How old are you now?"

"Sixteen," Kathrin answered.

"I am speaking of something that was seen, in daylight, not made up to frighten bairns."

"But people say they have seen jangling men. They have seen men made of tin and gears, like the inside of a clock."

"Some people were frightened too much when they were small," Peter said, with a dismissive shake. "No more than that. But the sheriff is real, and he was once able to fly. That's God's truth."

Her hands were hurting again by the time she reached Twenty Arch Bridge. She tugged down the sleeves of her sweater, using them as mittens. Rooks and jackdaws wheeled and cawed overhead. Seagulls feasted on waste floating in the narrow races between the bridge's feet, or pecked at vile leavings on the road that had been missed by the night soil gatherers. A boy laughed as Kathrin nearly tripped on the labyrinth of crisscrossing ruts that had been etched by years of wagon wheels entering and leaving the bridge. She hissed a curse back at the boy, but now the wagons served her purpose. She skulked near a doorway until a heavy cart came rumbling along, top-heavy with beer barrels from the Blue Star Brewery, drawn by four snorting dray-horses, a bored-looking drayman at the reins, huddled down so deep into his leather coat that it seemed as if the Great Winter still had its icy hand on the country.



Kathrin started walking as the cart lumbered past her, using it as a screen. Between the stacked beer barrels she could see the top level of the scaffolding that was shoring up the other side of the arch, visible since no house or parapet stood on that part of the bridge. A dozen or so workers – including a couple of aproned foremen – were standing on the scaffolding, looking down at the work going on below. Some of them had plumb lines; one of them even had a little black rod that shone a fierce red spot wherever he wanted something moved. Of Garret, the reason she wished to cross the bridge only once if she could help it, there was nothing to be seen. Kathrin hoped that he was under the side of the bridge, hectoring the workers. She felt sure that her father was down there too, being told what to do and biting his tongue against answering back. He put up with being shouted at, he put up with being forced to treat wood with crude disrespect, because it was all he could do to earn enough money to feed and shelter himself and his daughter. And he never, ever, looked Garret Kinnear in the eye.

Kathrin felt her mood easing as the dray ambled across the bridge, nearing the slight rise over the narrow middle arches. The repair work, where Garret was most likely to be, was now well behind her. She judged her progress by the passage of alehouses. She had passed the newly painted Bridge Inn and the shuttered gloom of the Lord's Confessor. Fiddle music spilled from the open doorway of the Dancing Panda: an old folksong with nonsense lyrics about *sickly sausage rolls*.

Ahead lay the Winged Man, its sign containing a strange painting of a foreboding figure rising from a hilltop. If she passed the Winged Man, she felt she would be safe.

Then the dray hit a jutting cobblestone and the rightmost front wheel snapped free of its axle. The wheel wobbled off on its own. The cart tipped to the side, spilling beer barrels onto the ground. Kathrin stepped nimbly aside as one of the barrels ruptured and sent its fizzing, piss-coloured contents across the roadway. The horses snorted and strained. The drayman spat out a greasy wad of chewing tobacco and started down from his chair, his face a mask of impassive resignation, as if this was the kind of thing that could be expected to happen once a day. Kathrin heard him whisper something in the ear of one of the horses, in beast-tongue, which

calmed the animal.

Kathrin knew that she had no choice but to continue. Yet she had no sooner resumed her pace – moving faster now, the bags swaying awkwardly, than she saw Garret Kinnear. He was just stepping out of the Winged Man's doorway.

He smiled. "You in a hurry or something?"

Kathrin tightened her grip on the bags, as if she was going to use them as weapons. She decided not to say anything, not to openly acknowledge his presence, even though their eyes had met for an electric instant.

"Getting to be a big strong girl now, Kathrin Lynch."

She carried on walking, each step taking an eternity. How foolish she had been, to take Twenty Arch Bridge when it would only have cost her another hour to take the further crossing. She should not have allowed Peter to delay her with his good intentions.

"You want some help with them bags of yours?"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him move out of the doorway, tugging his

depths, frowning. "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry with this?"

"Give me back the bag."

She reached for the bag, tried to grab it back, but he held it out of her reach, grinning cruelly.

"That's mine."

"How much would a pig's head be worth?"

"You tell me. There's only one pig around here."

They'd passed the mill next to the Winged Man. There was a gap between the mill and the six-storey house next to it, where some improbably narrow property must once have existed. Garret turned down the alley, still carrying Kathrin's bag. He reached the parapet at the edge of the bridge and looked over the side. He rummaged in the bag and drew out the pig's head. Kathrin hesitated at the entrance to the narrow alley, watching as Garret held the head out over the roiling water.

"You can have your pig back. Just come a wee bit closer."

"So you can do what you did last time?"

"I don't remember any complaints."

He let the head fall, then caught it again,

"When I was a boy I met someone who had seen the sheriff's flying machine. A whirling thing, like a windmill made of tin"

mud-stained trousers higher onto his hip. Garret Kinnear was snake thin, all skin and bone, but much stronger than he looked. He wiped a hand across his sharp beardless chin. He had long black hair, the greasy grey colour of dishwater.

"Go away," she hissed, hating herself in the same instant.

"Just making conversation," he said.

Kathrin quickened her pace, glancing nervously around. All of a sudden the bridge appeared deserted. The shops and houses she had yet to pass were all shuttered and silent. There was still a commotion going on by the dray, but no one there was paying any attention to what was happening further along the bridge.

"Leave me alone," Kathrin said.

He was walking almost alongside her now, between Kathrin and the road. "Now what kind of way to talk is that, Kathrin Lynch? Especially after my offer to help you with them bags. What have you got in them, anyways?"

"Nothing that's any business of yours."

"I could be the judge of that." Before she could do anything, he'd snatched the bag from her left hand. He peered into its dark

Kathrin's heart in her throat.

"You know I couldn't complain."

"Not much to ask for a pig's head, is it?" With his free hand, he fumbled open his trousers, tugging out the pale worm of his cock. "You did it before, and it didn't kill you. Why not now? I won't trouble you again."

She watched his cock stiffen. "You said that last time."

"Aye, but this time I mean it. Come over here, Kathrin. Be a good girl now and you'll have your pig back."

Kathrin looked back over her shoulder. No one was going to disturb them. The dray had blocked all the traffic behind it, and nothing was coming over the bridge from the south.

"Please," she said.

"Just this once," Garret said. "And make your mind up fast, girl. This pig's getting awfully heavy in my hand."

Kathrin stood in the widow's candlelit kitchen – it only had one tiny, dusty window – while the old woman turned her bent back to attend to the coals burning in her black metal stove. She poked and prodded the fire

until it hissed back like a cat. "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry?" she asked.

"Aye," Kathrin said. The room smelled smoky.

"That's too far for anyone, let alone a sixteen year old lass. I should have a word with your father. I heard he was working on Twenty Arch Bridge."

Kathrin shifted uncomfortably. "I don't mind walking. The weather's all right."

"So they say. All the same, the evenings are still cold, and there are types about you wouldn't care to meet on your own, miles from Jarrow."

"I'll be back before it gets dark," Kathrin said, with more optimism than she felt. Not if she went out of her way to avoid Garret Kinnear she wouldn't. He knew the route she'd normally take back home, and the alternatives would mean a much longer journey.

"You sure about that?"

"I have no one else to visit. I can start home now," Kathrin offered her one remaining bag, as Widow Grayling turned from the fire, brushing her hands on her apron.

Kathrin lowered herself onto the stool. "The other bag was taken from me," she answered quietly.

"By who?"

"Someone on the bridge."

"Children?"

"A man."

Widow Grayling nodded slowly, as if Kathrin's answer had only confirmed some deep-seated suspicion she had harboured for many years. "Thomas Kinnear's boy, was it?"

"How could you know?"

"Because I've lived long enough to form ready opinions of people. Garret Kinnear is filth. But there's no one that'll touch him, because they're scared of his father. Even the sheriff tugs his forelock to Thomas Kinnear. Did he rape you?"

"No. But he wanted me to do something nearly as bad."

"And did he make you?"

Kathrin looked away.

"Not this time."

Widow Grayling closed her eyes. She reached across the table and took one of Kathrin's hands, squeezing it between her

cannot avoid Garret forever."

"I can take the other bridge."

"That'll make no difference, now that he has his eye on you."

Kathrin looked down at her hands.

"Then he's won already."

"No, he just thinks that he has." Without warning the widow stood from her chair.

"How long have we known each other, would you say?"

"Since I was small."

"And in all that time, have I come to seem any older to you?"

"You've always seemed the same to me, Widow Grayling."

"An old woman. The witch on the hill."

"There are good witches and bad witches," Kathrin pointed out.

"And there are mad old women who don't belong in either category. Wait a moment."

Widow Grayling stooped under the impossibly low doorway into the next room. Kathrin heard a scrape of wood on wood, as of a drawer being opened. She heard rummaging sounds. Widow Grayling returned with something in her hands, wrapped in red cotton. Whatever it was, she put it down on the table. By the noise it made Kathrin judged that it was an item of some weight and solidity.

"I was just like you once. I grew up not far from Ferry, in the darkest, coldest years of the Great Winter."

"How long ago?"

"The sheriff then was William the Questioner. You won't have heard of him." Widow Grayling sat down in the same seat she'd been using before and quickly exposed the contents of the red cotton bundle.

Kathrin wasn't quite sure what she was looking at. There was a thick and unornamented bracelet, made of some dull grey metal like pewter. Next to the ornament was something like the handle of a broken sword: a grip, with a crisscrossed pattern on it, with a curved guard reaching from one end of the hilt to the other. It was fashioned from the same dull grey metal.

"Pick it up," the widow said. "Feel it."

Kathrin reached out tentatively and closed her fingers around the crisscrossed hilt. It felt cold and hard and not quite the right shape for her hand. She lifted it from the table, feeling its weight.

"What is it, widow?"

"It's yours. It's a thing that has been in my possession for a very long while, but now it must change hands."

Kathrin didn't know quite what to say. A gift was a gift, but neither she nor her father

"Put it on the table, will you?"

Kathrin put the bag down. "One pig's head, and twenty candles, just as you wanted," she said brightly.

Widow Grayling hobbled over to the table, supporting herself with a stick, eyeing Kathrin as she opened the bag and took out the solitary head. She weighed it in her hand then set it down on the table, the head facing Kathrin in such a way that its beady black eyes and smiling snout suggested amused complicity.

"It's a good head," the widow said. "But there were meant to be two of them."

"Can you manage with just the one, until I visit again? I'll have three for you next time."

"I'll manage if I must. Was there a problem with the butcher in the Shield?"

Kathrin had considered feigning ignorance, saying that she did not recall how only one head had come to be in her bags. But she knew Widow Grayling too well for that.

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Of course." The widow hobbled around the table to one of the rickety stools and dragged it out. "Are you all right, girl?"

own. "When was it?"

"Three months ago, when there was still snow on the ground. I had to cross the bridge on my own. It was later than usual, and there weren't any people around. I knew about Garret already, but I'd managed to keep away from him. I thought I was going to be lucky." Kathrin turned back to face her companion. "He caught me and took me into one of the mills. The wheels were turning, but there was nobody inside except me and Garret. I struggled, but then he put his finger to my lips and told me to shush."

"Because of your father?"

"If I made trouble, if I did not do what he wanted, Garret would tell his father some lie about mine. He would say that he caught him sleeping on the job, or drunk, or stealing nails."

"Garret promised you that?"

"He said, life's hard enough for a sledge-maker's daughter when no one wants sledges. He said it would only be harder if my father lost his work."

"In that respect he was probably right," the widow said resignedly. "It was brave of you to hold your silence, Kathrin. But the problem hasn't gone away, has it? You



would have any use for this ugly broken thing, save for its value to a scrap man.

"What happened to the sword?" she asked.

"There was never a sword. The thing you are holding is the entire object."

"Then I don't understand what it is for."

"You shall, in time. I'm about to place a hard burden on your shoulders. I have often thought that you were the right one, but I wished to wait until you were older, stronger. But what has happened today cannot be ignored. I am old and weakening. It would be a mistake to wait another year."

"I still don't understand."

"Take the bracelet. Put it on your wrist."

Kathrin did as she was told. The bracelet opened on a heavy hinge, like a manacle. When she locked it together, the join was nearly invisible. It was a cunning thing, to be sure. But it still felt as heavy and dead and useless as the broken sword.

Kathrin tried to keep a composed face, all the while suspecting that the widow was as mad as people had always said.

"Thank you," she said, with as much sincerity as she could muster.

"Now listen to what I have to say. You walked across the bridge today. Doubtless you passed the inn known as the Winged Man."

"It was where Garret caught up with me."

"Did it ever occur to you to wonder where the name of the tavern comes from?"

"My dad told me once. He said the tavern was named after a metal statue that used to stand on a hill to the south, on the Durham road."

"And did your father explain the origin of this statue?"

"He said some people reckoned it had been up there since before the Great Winter. Other people said an old sheriff had put it up. Some other people..." But Kathrin trailed off.

"Yes?"

"It's silly, but they said a real Winged Man had come down, out of the sky."

"And did your father place any credence in that story?"

"Not really," Kathrin said.

"He was right not to. The statue was indeed older than the Great Winter, when they tore it down. It was not put up to honour the sheriff, or commemorate the arrival of a Winged Man." Now the widow looked at her intently. "But a Winged Man *did* come down. I know what happened, Kathrin: I saw the statue with my own eyes, before the Winged Man fell. I was there."

Kathrin shifted. She was growing

uncomfortable in the widow's presence.

"My dad said people reckoned the Winged Man came down hundreds of years ago."

"It did."

"Then you can't have been there, Widow Grayling."

"Because if I had been, I should be dead by now? You're right. By all that is natural, I should be. I was born three hundred years ago, Kathrin. I've been a widow for more than two hundred of those years, though not always under this name. I've moved from house to house, village to village, as soon as people start suspecting what I am. I found the Winged Man when I was sixteen years old, just like you."

Kathrin smiled tightly. "I want to believe you."

"You will, shortly. I already told you that this was the coldest time of the Great Winter. The sun was a cold grey disk, as if it was made of ice itself. For years the river hardly thawed at all. The Frost Fair stayed almost all year round. It was nothing like the miserable little gatherings you have known. This was ten times bigger, a whole

"Only because we can't make fires hot enough to make that metal smelt down like iron or copper. Once, we could. But if you could find a small piece with an edge, there was *nothing* it couldn't cut through. A surgeon's best knife will always be skydrift."

"Some people think the metal belongs to the jangling men, and that anyone who touches it will be cursed."

"And I'm sure the sheriff does nothing to persuade them otherwise. Do you think the jangling men care what happens to their metal?"

"I don't think they care, because I don't think they exist."

"I was once of the same opinion. Then something happened to make me change my mind."

"This being when you found the Winged Man, I take it."

"Before even that. I would have been thirteen, I suppose. It was in the back of a tent in the Frost Fair. There was a case holding a hand made of metal, found among skydrift near Wallsend."

"A rider's gauntlet."

"I don't think so. It was broken off at

"I know what happened, Kathrin: I saw the statue with my own eyes, before the Winged Man fell. I was there"

city built on the frozen river. It had streets and avenues, its own quarters. There were tents and stalls, with skaters and sledges everywhere. There'd be races, jousting competitions, fireworks, mystery players, even printing presses to make newspapers and souvenirs just for the Frost Fair. People came from miles around to see it, Kathrin: from as far away as Carlisle or York."

"Didn't they get bored with it, if it was always there?"

"It was always changing, though. Every few months there was something different. You would travel fifty miles to see a new wonder if enough people started talking about it. And there was no shortage of wonders, even if they were not always quite what you had imagined when you set off on your journey. Things fell from the sky more often in those days. A living thing like the Winged Man was still a rarity, but other things came down regularly enough. People would spy where they fell and try to get there first. Usually all they'd find would be bits of hot metal, all warped and runny like melted sugar."

"Skydrift," Kathrin said. "Metal that's no use to anyone, except barbers and butchers."

the wrist, but you could tell that it used to belong to something that was also made of metal. There were metal bones and muscles in it. No cogs or springs, like in a clock or tin toy. This was something finer, more ingenious. I don't believe any man could have made it. But it cannot just be the jangling men who drop things from the sky, or fall out of it."

"Why not?" Kathrin asked, in the spirit of someone going along with a game.

"Because it was said that the sheriff's men once found a head of skin and bone, all burned up, but which still had a pair of spectacles on it. The glass in them was dark like coal, but when the sheriff wore them, he could see at night like a wolf. Another time, his men found a shred of garment that kept changing colour, depending on what it was lying against. You could hardly see it then. Not enough to make a suit, but you could imagine how useful that would have been to the sheriff's spies."

"They'd have wanted to get to the Winged Man first."

Widow Grayling nodded. "It was just luck that I got to him first. I was on the Durham road, riding a mule, when he fell

from the sky. Now, the law said that they would spike your head on the bridge if you touched something that fell on the sheriff's land, especially skydrift. But everyone knew that the sheriff could only travel so fast, even when he had his flying machine. It was a risk worth taking, so I took it, and I found the Winged Man, and he was still alive."

"Was he really a man?"

"He was a creature of flesh and blood, not a jangling man, but he was not like any man I had seen before. He was smashed and bent, like a toy that had been trodden on. When I found him he was covered in armour, hot enough to turn the snow to water and make the water hiss and bubble under him. I could only see his face. A kind of golden mask had come off, lying next to him. There were bars across his mask, like the head of the Angel on the tavern sign. The rest of him was covered in metal, jointed in a clever fashion. It was silver in places and black in others, where it had been scorched. His arms were metal wings, as wide across as the road itself if they had not been snapped back on themselves. Instead of legs he just had a long tail, with a

answering me. 'Perhaps not, after all this time. Do you know of fliers, girl? Do any of you still remember the war?'"

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth. I said I knew nothing of a war, unless he spoke of the Battle of the Stadium of Light, which had only happened twenty years earlier. He looked sad then, as if he had hoped for a different answer. I asked him if he was a kind of soldier. He said that he was. 'Fliers are warriors,' he said. 'Men like me are fighting a great war, on your behalf, against an enemy you do not even remember.'"

"What enemy?"

"The jangling men. They exist, but not in the way we imagine them. They don't crawl in through bedroom windows at night, clacking tin-bodied things with skull faces and clockwork keys whirring from their backs. But they're real enough."

"Why would such things exist?"

"They'd been made to do the work of men on the other side of the sky, where men cannot breathe because the air is so thin. They made the jangling men canny enough that they could work without being

more strength to shore it up when it has already been dug. In an army, it would be the muscle of men and horses and whatever machines still work. But the flier was talking about a different kind of strength altogether." The widow paused, then stared into Kathrin's eyes with a look of foreboding. "He told me where it came from, you see. And ever since then, I have seen the world with different eyes. It is a hard burden, Kathrin. But someone must bear it."

Without thinking, Kathrin said, "Tell me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I want to know."

"That bracelet has been on your wrist for a few minutes now. Does it feel any different?"

"No," Kathrin said automatically, but as soon as she'd spoken, as soon as she'd moved her arm, she knew that it was not the case. The bracelet still looked the same, it still looked like a lump of cold dead metal, but it seemed to hang less heavily against her skin than when she'd first put it on.

"The flier gave it to me," Widow

Grayling said, observing Kathrin's reaction. "He told me how to open his armour and find the bracelet. I asked why. He said it was because I had offered him water. He was giving me something in return for that kindness. He said that the bracelet would keep me healthy, make me strong in other ways, and that if anyone else was to wear it, it would cure them of many ailments. He said that it was against the common law of his people to give such a gift to one such as I, but he chose to do it anyway. I opened his armour, as he told me, and I found his arm, bound by iron straps to the inside of his wing, and broken like the wing itself. On the end of his arm was this bracelet."

"If the bracelet had the power of healing, why was the Winged Man dying?"

"He said that there were certain afflictions it could not cure. He had been touched by the poisonous ichor of a jangling man, and the bracelet could do nothing for him now."

"I still do not believe in magic," Kathrin said carefully.

"Certain magics are real, though. The magic that makes a machine fly, or a man see in the dark. The bracelet feels lighter, because part of it has entered you. It is in your blood now, in your marrow, just as the jangling man's ichor was in the flier's. You felt nothing, and you will continue to feel nothing. But so long as you wear the bracelet, you will age much slower than

kind of fluke at the end of it. I crept closer, watching the sky all around me for the sheriff's whirling machine. I was fearful at first, but when I saw the Winged Man's face I only wanted to do what I could for him. And he was dying. I knew it, because I'd seen the same look on the faces of men hanging from the sheriff's killing poles."

"Did you talk to him?"

"I asked him if he wanted some water. At first he just looked at me, his eyes pale as the sky, his lips opening and closing like a fish that has just been landed. Then he said, 'Water will not help me.' Just those five words, in a dialect I didn't know. Then I asked him if there was anything else I could do to help him, all the while glancing over my shoulder in case anyone should come upon us. But the road was empty and the sky was clear. It took a long time for him to answer me again."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'Thank you, but there is nothing you can do for me.' Then I asked him if he was an angel. He smiled, ever so slightly. 'No,' he said. 'Not an angel, really. But I am a flier.' I asked him if there was a difference. He smiled again before

told *exactly* what to do. But that already made them slyer than foxes. The jangling men coveted our world for themselves. That was before the Great Winter came in. The flier said that men like him – special soldiers, born and bred to fight the jangling men – were all that was holding them back."

"And he told you they were fighting a war, above the sky?"

Something pained Widow Grayling. "All the years since haven't made it any easier to understand what the flier told me. He said that, just as there may be holes in an old piece of timber, one that has been eaten through by woodworm, so there may be holes in the sky itself. He said that his wings were not really to help him fly, but to help him navigate those tunnels in the sky, just as the wheels of a cart find their way into the ruts on a road."

"I don't understand. How can there be holes in the sky, when the air is already too thin to breathe?"

"He said that the fliers and the jangling men make these holes, just as armies may dig a shifting network of trenches and tunnels as part of a long campaign. It requires strength to dig a hole and



anyone else. For centuries, no sickness or infirmity will touch you."

Kathrin stroked the bracelet. "I do not believe this."

"I would not expect you to. In a year or two, you will feel no change in yourself. But in five years, or in ten, people will start to remark upon your uncommon youthfulness. For a while, you will glory in it. Then you will feel admiration turn slowly to envy and then to hate, and it will start to feel like a curse. Like me, you will need to move on and take another name. This will be the pattern of your life, while you wear the flier's charm."

Kathrin looked at the palm of her hand. It might have been imagination, but the lines where the handles had cut into her were paler and less sensitive to the touch.

"Is this how you heal people?" she asked.

"You're as wise as I always guessed you were, Kathrin Lynch. Should you come upon someone who is ill, you need only place the bracelet around their wrist for a whole day and – unless they have the jangling man's ichor in them – they will be cured."

"What of the other things? When my father hurt his arm, he said you tied an eel around his arm."

Her words made the widow smile. "I probably did. I could just as well have smeared pigeon dung on it instead, or made him wear a necklace of worms, for all the difference it would have made. Your father's arm would have mended itself on its own, Kathrin. The cut was deep, but clean. It did not need the bracelet to heal, and your father was neither stupid nor feverish. But he did have the loose tongue of all small boys. He would have seen the bracelet, and spoken of it."

"Then you did nothing."

"Your father believed that I did something. That was enough to ease the pain in his arm and perhaps allow it to heal faster than it would otherwise have done."

"But you turn people away."

"If they are seriously ill, but neither feverish nor unconscious, I cannot let them see the bracelet. There is no other way, Kathrin. Some must die, so that the bracelet's secret is protected."

"This is the burden?" Kathrin asked doubtfully.

"No, this is the reward for carrying the burden. The burden is knowledge."

Again, Kathrin said, "Tell me."

"This is what the flier told me. The Great Winter fell across our world because the sun itself grew colder and paler. There

was a reason for that. The armies of the celestial war were mining its fire, using the furnace of the sun itself to dig and shore up those seams in the sky. How they did this is beyond my comprehension, and perhaps even that of the flier himself. But he did make one thing clear. So long as the Great Winter held, the celestial war must still be raging. And that would mean that the jangling men had not yet won."

"But the Thaw..." Kathrin began.

"Yes, you see it now. The snow melts from the land. Rivers flow, crops grow again. The people rejoice, they grow stronger and happier, skins darken, the Frost Fairs fade into memory. But they do not understand what it really means."

Kathrin hardly dared ask. "Which side is winning, or has already won?"

"I don't know; that's the terrible part of it. But when the flier spoke to me, I sensed an awful hopelessness, as if he knew things were not going to go the way of his people."

"I'm frightened now."

"You should be. But someone needs to know, Kathrin, and the bracelet is losing its power to keep me out of the grave. Not because there is anything wrong with it, I think – it heals as well as it has ever done – but because it has decided that my time has grown sufficient, just as it will eventually decide the same thing with you."

Kathrin touched the other object, the thing that looked like a sword's handle.

"What is this?"

"The flier's weapon. His hand was holding it from inside the wing. It poked through the outside of the wing like the claw of a bat. The flier showed me how to remove it. It is yours as well."

She had touched it already, but this time Kathrin felt a sudden tingle as her fingers wrapped around the hilt. She let go suddenly, gasping as if she had reached for a stick and picked up an adder, squirming and slippery and venomous.

"Yes, you feel its power," Widow Grayling said admiringly. "It works for no one unless they carry the bracelet."

"I can't take it."

"Better you have it, than let that power go to waste. If the jangling men come, then at least someone will have a means to hurt them. Until then, there are other uses for it."

Without touching the hilt, Kathrin slipped the weapon into her pocket where it lay as heavy and solid as a pebble.

"Did you ever use it?"

"Once."

"What did you do?"

She caught a secretive smile on Widow Grayling's face. "I took something precious from William the Questioner. Banished him to the ground like the rest of us. I meant to kill him, but he was not riding in the machine when I brought it down."

Kathrin laughed. Had she not felt the power of the weapon, she might have dismissed the widow's story as the ramblings of an old woman. But she had no reason in the world to doubt her companion.

"You could have killed the sheriff later, when he came to inspect the killing poles."

"I nearly did. But something always stayed my hand. Then the sheriff was replaced by another man, and he in turn by another. Sheriffs came and went. Some were evil men, but not all of them. Some were only as hard and cruel as their office demanded. I never used the weapon again, Kathrin. I sensed that its power was not limitless, that it must be used sparingly, against the time when it became really necessary. But to use it in defence, against a smaller target...that would be a different matter, I think."

Kathrin thought she understood.

"I need to be getting back home," she said, trying to sound as if they had discussed nothing except the matter of the widow's next delivery of provisions. "I am sorry about the other head."

"There is no need to apologise. It was not your doing."

"What will happen to you now, widow?"

"I'll fade, slowly and gracefully. Perhaps I will see things through to the next winter. But I don't expect to see another thaw."

"Please. Take the bracelet back."

"Kathrin, listen. It will make no difference to me now, whether you take it or not."

"I'm not old enough for this. I'm only a girl from the Shield, a sledge-maker's daughter."

"What do you think I was, when I found the flier? We were the same. I've seen your strength and courage."

"I wasn't strong today."

"Yet you took the bridge, when you knew Garret would be on it. I have no doubt, Kathrin."

She stood. "If I had not lost the other head...if Garret had not caught me...would you have given me these things?"

"I was minded to do it. If not today, it would have happened next time. But let us give Garret due credit. He helped me make up my mind."

"He's still out there," Kathrin said.

"But he will know you will not be taking the bridge to get back home, even though that would save you paying the toll at Jarrow Ferry. He will content himself to wait until you cross his path again."

Kathrin collected her one remaining bag and moved to the door.

"Yes."

"I will see you again, in a month. Give my regards to your father."

"I will."

Widow Grayling opened the door. The sky was darkening to the east, in the direction of Jarrow Ferry. The dusk stars would appear shortly, and it would be dark within the hour. The crows were still wheeling, but more languidly now, preparing to roost. Though the Great Winter was easing, the evenings seemed as cold as ever, as if night was the final stronghold, the place where the winter had retreated when the inevitability of its defeat became apparent. Kathrin knew that she would be shivering long before she reached the tollgate at the crossing, miles down the river. She tugged down her hat in readiness for the journey and stepped onto the broken road in front of the widow's cottage.

"You will take care now, Kathrin. Watch out for the janglies."

"I will, Widow Grayling."

The door closed behind her. She heard a bolt slide into place.

She was alone.

Kathrin set off, following the path she had used to climb up from the river. If it was arduous in daylight, it was steep and treacherous at dusk. As she descended she could see Twenty Arch Bridge from above, a thread of light across the shadowed ribbon of the river. Candles were being lit in the inns and houses that lined the bridge, tallow torches burning along the parapets. There was still light at the north end, where the sagging arch was being repaired. The obstruction caused by the dray had been cleared, and traffic was moving normally from bank to bank. She heard the calls of men and women, the barked orders of foremen, the braying of drunkards and slatterns, the regular creak and splash of the mill wheels turning under the arches.

Presently she reached a fork in the path and paused. To the right lay the quickest route down to the quayside road to Jarrow Ferry. To the left lay the easiest descent down to the bridge, the path that she had already climbed. Until that moment, her resolve had been clear. She would take the ferry, as she always did, as she was

expected to do.

But now she reached a hand into her pocket and closed her fingers around the flier's weapon. The shiver of contact was less shocking this time. The object already felt a part of her, as if she had carried it for years.

She drew it out. It gleamed in twilight, shining where it had appeared dull before. Even if the widow had not told her of its nature, there would have been no doubt now. The object spoke its nature through her skin and bones, whispering to her on a level beneath language. It told her what it could do and how she could make it obey her. It told her to be careful of the power she now carried in her hand. She must scruple to use it wisely, for nothing like it now existed in the world. It was the power to smash walls. Power to smash bridges and towers and flying machines. Power to smash jangling men.

Power to smash ordinary men, if that was what she desired.

She had to know.

The last handful of crows gyred overhead. She raised the weapon to them and felt a sudden dizzying apprehension of their number and distance and position, each crow feeling distinct from its brethren, as if she could almost name them.

She selected one laggard bird. All the others faded from her attention, like players removing themselves from a stage. She came to know that last bird intimately. She could feel its wingbeats cutting the cold air. She could feel the soft thatch of its feathers, and the lacelike scaffolding of bone underneath. Within the cage of its chest she felt the tiny strong pulse of its heart, and she knew that she could make that heart freeze just by willing it.

The weapon seemed to urge her to do it. She came close. She came frighteningly close.

But the bird had done nothing to wrong her, and she spared it. She had no need to take a life to test this new gift, at least not an innocent one. The crow rejoined its brethren, something skittish and hurried in its flight, as if it had felt that coldness closing around its heart.

Kathrin returned the weapon to her pocket. She looked at the bridge again, measuring it once more with clinical eyes, eyes that were older and sadder this time, because she knew something that the people on the bridge could never know.

"I'm ready," she said, aloud, into the night, for whoever might be listening.

Then resumed her descent. ▀

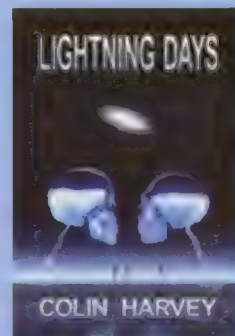
A mystery in Afghanistan leads to the end of the world...

Lightning Days

By Colin Harvey

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Daniel Kaysen has made five previous appearances in *Interzone*. His short stories have also been published in *Strange Horizons*, *ChiZine*, *The Third Alternative* and others, with another forthcoming in *Black Static*. Daniel lives in Hertfordshire.



David Gentry was born in 1977 and currently lives in Kent. A self-taught artist (after a stint at an art college) he creates his artwork digitally using anything that comes to hand including photographs, scans, paint and ink. His work has been seen in many publications including *Computer Arts*, *Interzone* (sometimes twice in one issue!), *Digit Magazine*, *The Third Alternative*, *Exposé* and *Spectrum* as well as CD covers and private commissions. He is currently working on the long awaited *Black Static* magazine.

TEARS FOR GODZILLA by DANIEL KAYSEN illustrated by DAVID GENTRY

Silence fell as we stood in the coffee shop queue.

I'd prayed that it wouldn't happen. After all, there was so much to talk about. I hadn't seen Amanda in ten years, and in that time she'd gone to university, married Ian, who I could never bear to meet, explored the tropical rainforests and then just recently, wonderfully, got a divorce.

There was all that to talk about. And I hadn't been twiddling my thumbs either. Since we'd last seen each other I'd published seven lurid horror novels, available at all good bookshops, and a riskier crossgenre novel which my publishers made me call *Tears for Godzilla* to try to suck in my fanbase. It didn't work. *Tears* got good reviews from the broadsheets, but died on its arse in the shops. Nobody bought it at all. But still, I'd done alright.

There was stuff I hadn't done, of course. I hadn't travelled much, and I hadn't married. I'd never wondered why, really, until I got Amanda's email saying she'd love to do coffee if I was ever in town. I knew then that I had never got over the massive crush I'd had on her at school.

And now here we were, in town.

Doing coffee, or at least queuing for it.

In desperate, awkward silence.

My only excuse was that I had a killing headache – one of those caffeine withdrawal headaches that feel like a hot knife in the temporal lobe.

I was overdue a large strong black coffee,

but the queue seemed to have stalled.

Amanda craned her head to see what the problem was.

I took the chance to watch her face. I'd missed it, this last decade.

But as I watched, she paled.

From the front of the queue came a crashing of crockery.

I looked and saw what Amanda had seen – a tall sharp-suited man holding his hands to the side of his head, squeezing his temples like a vice.

His face was a mask of perfect pain.

He was making a sound I hadn't heard since visiting my dad in hospital. The guy in the next bed had been dying slowly, painfully, loudly. It isn't a sound I ever wanted to hear again. But here it was.

I knew it wasn't going to end well.

"We better go, Amanda," I said.

She didn't move. Her face was a mix of pity and revulsion.

"Amanda, c'mon. He'll be fine, let's go."

But then her hand flew up to her mouth.

"Oh, no!"

Her expression turned to horror. There was a sickening sound from the front of the queue, like a hammer hitting a watermelon.

The guy was lying on the floor, spasming. His head had hit the corner of a table, and was now leaking blood and stuff in a pool on the floor around him.

It was really, *really*, time for us to go.

Amanda put up no resistance as I

dragged her out of the coffee shop and twenty yards up the road.

We stopped in front of Sainsbury's.

She grabbed me and held me tight, her face thrust into my shoulder.

I held her tight in turn.

"It's okay, it's okay," I said. "He's still alive. The ambulance will patch him up."

It was a giant lie. The stuff that was leaking from his head really hadn't looked good. In fact, he was probably already dead, but I wasn't going to tell her that.

I just said, "It's okay, it's okay," as she held me tighter.

A siren started in the middle distance.

"See?" I said. "The ambulance is coming."

She relaxed, ever so slightly, in my arms.

But then she tensed again. There was screaming coming from the coffee shop.

"What is it?" she said.

"I don't know. Probably nothing."

But there were more screams then, and I knew what was happening.

Individual fear was becoming mass panic.

"We better move," I said. I didn't want to be standing in front of a plate-glass window if the panic turned into a stampede. "Let's go round the corner to the park," I said.

Technically it was a graveyard rather than a park, but the graves were sparse, and there were benches and peace and space. We'd be safe there.

But before we could move she pointed back the way we'd come. Her mouth was an O of shock.

**DANIEL
KAYSEN**

**TEARS FOR
GODZILLA**

I followed her gaze.

It was the guy from the coffee shop. The sharp-suited guy. The guy with the bashed-in head.

He was spasming up the road towards us.

It wasn't the zombie shuffle you see in movies. It was giant fits that threw him forward, one stride at a time.

With each step that he took, he made a sound. The sound of long, slow dying.

But that wasn't the worst bit.

The worst bit wasn't even his eyes, which were psychosis wide.

The worst bit was that his eyes were fixed on Amanda, as he took another giant fit-step towards her, then another.

"What does he *want*?" She was on the edge of hysteria.

I didn't tell her that I thought I knew exactly what he wanted. A guy can tell when another guy's in lust.

Instead I just said: "Run!"

"But –"

I dragged her into running, up the road and then down the alley and into the graveyard.

Suddenly the sounds of dying from the guy, and the screams of the passers-by, were further away.

We were surrounded by birdsong. Couples were sitting in the sun. It was a different world.

I hurried her over to the far wall of the graveyard, wanting to put as much distance between us and *him* as possible.

Amanda started to shake.

"It's okay now," I said.

But she looked at me with eyes that said that nothing was okay. "Do you even know who that was?" she said.

"You know him?"

"It was *Ian*!"

Her ex-husband.

She made a sound like a mind about to break, and I knew that if I didn't want to lose her to complete hysteria then I either had to slap her, like they do in the movies, or I had to kiss her.

I kissed her, like I'd always wanted to.

She kissed me back.

"I've never been so scared in my whole life," she said, and then went back to kissing me, harder. She pressed her body full-length against me, and pulled me tight against her. "But it's done something to me," she said. "I *want* you."

It was years and years of dreaming, coming true.

"Say you want me too."

I opened my mouth to speak but then I

suddenly felt her freeze.

There was screaming, getting louder and closer, behind me. And the rhythmic sound of a man dying slowly as he lurched nearer and nearer.

"It's Ian!" she said.

I turned to see him thirty yards away, and gaining with each spasm.

Her ex-husband really didn't quit.

I picked up half a gravestone and ran towards him. I swung it at his head. A sickening sound, as epitaph met skull, and he fell. No spasming then. He was dead.

"You *saved* me," Amanda said, breathless, gazing into my eyes. "Say you'll take me. Here. *Now*."

I heard a siren, and when I looked over my shoulder I saw a police car pulling up at the top of the alley.

We would have to be quick, but that was fine by me. All those years of waiting, I didn't to want hang about.

I opened my mouth to say yes yes yes when suddenly, from out of nowhere, pain dropped me to my knees.

I put my hands to my temples, squeezing like a vice. I tried to scream, but the sound came out like slow dying.

The first spasm slammed me to the floor. My head cracked against a gravestone. A warm wet sticky pool formed around my face as I lay there.

Everything was pain.

Even the sudden understanding was pain.

Amanda must have picked up a weird virus in the rainforest, which was transmitted through kissing. It made her frisky, but it zombiefied her men.

But as far as I was concerned it changed nothing. I wanted her as much as ever.

With a giant effort, part-heave, part-fit, I got to my knees. Another fit took me to my feet.

I lurched towards her. I opened my mouth to tell her I wanted her. Here. *Now*.

And that's when a policeman shot me. The bullet entered the back of my head, and exited my mouth.

I fell. No more spasms. I knew this was death.

"Oh officer, you *saved* me!" I heard Amanda say, breathlessly.

Day turned to dusk in my head, then.

The sounds of the sirens, and my beloved getting frisky with the law, began to fade. Then dusk turned to midnight, and I was on the very edge of death.

And then, the silence.

Silence.

"Are you okay?" Amanda says.

I blink back to reality and the coffee shop.

"Sure." I try to smile.

"They looked like deep thoughts."

"Oh, you know. Just thinking about the queue."

Even in my stories, we never had sex. It was weird. Something always stopped me.

Maybe that's what a crush is. It's love that's destined to meet roadblocks and fallen trees and always get diverted.

And the roadblock is the intensity of the love. The other person will always get scared off. It's why by definition a crush can never be required.

"We could get coffee somewhere else if you want," she says. "Or we could go to Smith's, and look for your novels."

She needed disabusing of that particular conceit. "They're Literature. They'll never be in Smith's."

"What about Waterstone's?" she says.

Or maybe it's the other way round. The object of the crush can never meet the impossible standards of the person with the crush. It's always a disappointment.

I know then she must never read one of my books.

I try to think of a way of explaining the core idea of my work without her having to read a word of it, but if it fell neatly into soundbites I wouldn't have had to write the damn novel.

That's the trouble.

Nothing falls neatly into soundbites, not any more, not when I'm talking to anyone.

All that falls is silence.

.....
Silence.

We are in the coffee shop and the silence is now uncomfortably long.

It's not just me though. It's her too.

She's been silent for too long. It's beyond an awkward social moment.

It's suspicious.

There's something up. Something is going on. I try to think what.

Perhaps she has memory loss. She's forgotten who I am. She thinks we're strangers in the queue.

Or, I've got memory loss. I've forgotten that we've just been to a hotel, and made wild and passionate love. She cried with relief that we'd finally done it, but then the tears turned to pain. She's going back to Ian, for the sake of her unborn child. She's discovered this morning that she's pregnant, by him. It's a tragic mess, and she and I have talked about nothing else since

getting to the coffee shop, except I've had a *Memento* moment and forgotten it all.

Or.

Or she's mute. I've forgotten she's mute. Gangsters cut out her tongue.

Or she's foreign. My childhood pen-pal from Russia. Her written English is fantastic, but her spoken English sounds like Leeloo from *The Fifth Element* when she's doing alien-speak. Amanda's too embarrassed to talk.

Or maybe she is an alien.

An angel.

A figment of my imagination. No. Not that whole bollocks *Secret Windows/Fight Club* horrible horrible cheat.

I only saw the films, but still.

I write light fantasy romance. She loves my novels. She's come to meet me. Like all my readers, she thought I was a woman, and she's shocked into silence that I'm not.

She's my sister, and I don't know it, yet. No, I do know and we're going to do it anyway. No.

She's a spy. *True Lies*, reversed.

She's carried an almighty torch for me, all this time.

She's dead. She's a ghost.

I'm dead. A ghost, in hell.

She's dead too.

We're both dead.

We're both in hell.

My hell is that she's in hell, because of me, and I can't rescue her, because I'm just as trapped myself.

I blink.

It isn't hell. It's the coffee shop. She's craning to see what the hold-up is at the front of the queue. A guy in a sharp suit is arguing about his order.

Amanda only watches because it's something to do instead of standing in silence. She hopes I'll be better when we sit down. It will be easier to talk to me then, she thinks. She hopes.

But I know it won't be.

We'll fall into one of those silences that dog me, whoever I talk to. It's bad enough with friends and acquaintances, but with her it's too painful.

I can't explain that my silences are because my mind is overrun, because my mind is too overrun to explain.

I look at her. My heart turns over, like it always did. But it's all too much.

She's not looking at me. She won't immediately notice if I go.

So I softly slip away, and out the door.

Up the road, past Sainsbury's, past the alley to the graveyard.

Do not think about the immensity of what you've done. Keep walking, fast.

Cross at the lights, down the hill, take the right for the station.

She's going to think there's something wrong with her.

Over the footbridge, a train there waiting to go.

It's one more nail in her self-esteem, she'll think. Even her coffee-dates jump ship.

Through the doors, just as they're beeping.

I wonder if she's crying in the street.

It's too much to bear, and that part of my mind closes tight, automatically, with the doors.

I sit and look out of the window, wondering what a novel called *Tears for Godzilla* would be about.

I see him then, in the street below.

Godzilla, huge, lying there fallen and dying.

He's been a glorious rebellion of flesh and muscle against the deathcamp-grey of the concrete buildings around. If there had been any justice, he'd have seen a female mate stomping tower-blocks away across the river, and the two of them would have raced towards each other, flattening half the business district, and embraced. They'd have become a couple, marched their way across the city, across the countryside, over the sea, to somewhere hot for a honeymoon.

But the army shot him with armour-piercing depleted-uranium shells, and he's dying now, vast and lonely and unloved, and the deadly concrete world has won.

I almost cry then, by the window, for Godzilla, for everyone trapped in the grey who won't now be saved.

And then I realise: all my stories are tales of pain and monsters. But the monsters are good, and do not cause the pain.

That thought, that sense of having pinned something down, cheers me up.

My tears dry.

When the ticket inspector comes he's Amanda's Ian. He slow-danced with her at the leavers' disco at school. As far as I know that's all he ever did. But it's more than I did, and it's enough.

A pterodactyl bites Ian's head off and flaps victoriously down the carriage.

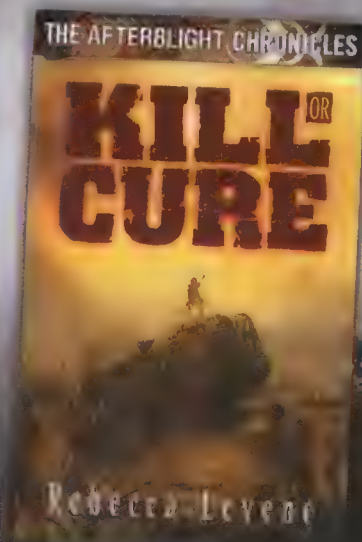
The blonde across the aisle smiles at me.

It's going to be okay.

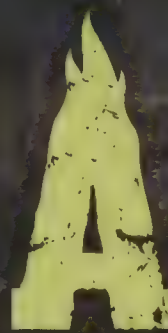
Godzilla, uranium-enriched, opens an eye. ■

THE AFTERBLIGHT CHRONICLES KILL OR CURE

By Rebecca Levene



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With more sense of its own fate than could ever have been known, Darren Aronofsky's gorgeous and silly white elephant **The Fountain** is a fable of obsessively trying and failing to cheat death across multiple incarnations. The backstory, though familiar, bears recapping: at the end of 2001, eight weeks from the start of filming, with sets already built and Brad Pitt prepped to play against Cate Blanchett, the studio pulled the plug on Aronofsky's \$70m epic. With all apparently over, Aronofsky gave the script to Vertigo for Kent Williams to turn into a graphic novel; but while Williams was working on his version, a still-obsessed Aronofsky had the idea of reworking the script for half the budget. By the time Williams' version hit the stands, the cheap *Fountain* had got made after all, and reactions to early screenings were tending to vindicate the studio's original misgivings about the whole project. The film has pretty much tanked, though it has its passionate advocates. But what's striking now that both versions are available for comparison is how little Aronofsky has really changed, beyond a few readily-sacrificable incidental extravagances in the historical and far-future segments.

The script is much as ever, though cut in a slightly different order: Hugh Jackman's character attempts to immortalise his doomed beloved Rachel Weisz in three incarnations whose initially enigmatic relationship is gradually disambiguated as the tale unfolds. In the present, he's an

oncologist who discovers a cure for ageing in a Guatemalan rainforest extract; in 1535, he's a conquistador on the trail of the tree of life in the service of a fictitious Spanish queen based vaguely on Isabella of Portugal; and in 2463 he's a space traveller voyaging into the heart of the Orion nebula to revive the dying tree that houses the last incarnation of her soul. As the three quests intercut en route to their parallel bittersweet resolutions, the direct connection between two of the stories becomes increasingly apparent and the status of the third correspondingly less so. If it sounds complex in outline, it's actually a film that if anything suffers from a surfeit of simplicity and a portentous overblowing of a monumentally banal and silly central idea. Yet it's lovely to look at, disarmingly impervious to embarrassment, and most thrillingly for sf viewers has a vision of far-future interstellar travel as far from starship opera as it's possible to get, tapping deep into the roots of the modern sf imagination in a way unlike anything yet seen on screen. And if the history, anthropology, and astrophysics are frankly balderdash, the primatology and oncology are rather pleasingly over-researched; this is surely the first film to include a credit to *The Rhesus Monkey Brain in Taxis Coordinates*. In the old days, collapsed productions would be lost in time like tears in rain; that this one, far from acknowledging its time to die, has bloomed afresh not once but twice is if nothing else a heartening affirmation of its own theme.

Luc Besson's **Arthur and the Invisibles** is another project premiered in a print adaptation during its tortuous five-year path to realisation, manifesting first as Besson's 2003 dilogy of *Arthur and the Minimoys* children's books about a subterranean tribe of minikins beneath the ten-year-old hero's garden. The roots, however, go deeper still: the novels were themselves based on an early version of the script, co-written with Céline Garcia as half of the husband-wife artist-writer comics team that devised the project in the first place. So now the film carries the striking credit 'Based on a universe by Patrice Garcia' (who also served on the film as art director), while the books are 'Based on an idea by Céline Garcia'. As this convoluted ancestry suggests, it's a spectacle-driven story rather than a story-driven spectacle, and as such prime material for Besson – whose curious prenovelisations were mainly notable for incomprehensibly frantic action sequences that have found their true home on film, where they're still incomprehensibly frantic but are at least more in step with the rhythm of the medium. The Froudish world of the *Minimoys* is an attractive fantasy rendering in animation of Besson's trademark underworld and grotesques, including the obligatory thugfight in a bar, though the reduction of the mighty Freddie Highmore to voice talent leaves the animated sections struggling to compete in charisma with Besson's quite stunning live-action direction of the character.

The plot, it hardly needs saying, is complete drivel, propped up with two quests and three conveniently synchronous deadlines, and with logic pits lurking under every tuft. (If Arthur's parents have 'money problems', how can they afford to send him to boarding school in England? if Madonna's character is the same age as Arthur in Minomoy years, how can there be a picture of her from when his mother was a baby? – and so forth.) The film has toned down the novel version's curious Catholic allegory about first kisses, marriage, and sexually transmitted powers, to the considerable relief of viewers mildly enqueased by the thought of Highmore snogging Madonna even in cg avatars, though David Bowie's villain is still allowed to have got that way by forgetting himself



MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

romantically with a poison bug. There are also unfortunate outbreaks of timidity in the English version, starting with the meaningless retitling (since the Minimoy is still a Minimoy in the dialogue) and extending to some unusually intrusive *Blade Runner*-style post-narration by David Suchet, talking over the perfectly sufficient original dialogue as shot. But it's hard not to be won over by the enthusiasm and zest with which the whole thing has been realised, and though once meant as Besson's directorial swansong it's had the happy effect of protracting his career a little longer, since he's now committed to trilogy the concept up in back-to-back sequels.



A much less happy version of the same experience has befallen Hollywood artist Jason Lethcoe, whose illustrated novel *Amazing Tales from Zoom's Academy* was originally self-published through BookSurge in 2003, and tracked its 13-year-old heroine's induction into a school for superheroes in the clouds, where she discovers her own late-blooming superpowers, bonds with her super-dad, and saves the school from takeover by its evil nemesis. Unusually for vanity-press products, the book was picked up by a commercial publisher and optioned for film, and the film now known simply as *Zoom* had evidently been greenlit in time for the first Ballantine edition in October 2005 to be able to announce with pride that it was to be a major motion picture. Which indeed it was, but interestingly not this one. In an extremely fishy-looking synchronicity of the kind only Hollywood can accomplish without a blush, in July 2005 Lethcoe's former studio Disney released their best live-action kiddie flick in years, the wonderfully sharp and beguiling *Sky High*, whose scenario mirrored Lethcoe's so closely as to suggest an unfathomable but distinctly whiffy causal connection. *Sky High* made its lead a boy, which conveniently suggested pegging the pubertal plot a demographically crucial couple of years older; and the relatively dark familial themes of Lethcoe's exorcism of his own divorce gave way to a more Disney-compliant affirmation of familial nuclearity. But otherwise the likenesses are deeply suspicious. Without attempting to find a curve that fits the data, one notes that vanity presses are sometimes used by Hollywood operators to rush intellectual property into print for copyright purposes; that more than one reviewer detected signs of hasty writing in Lethcoe's book, whose original BookSurge cover bore the words 'Copyrighted Material' at both top and bottom; and that, while Marvel and Fox sued *Zoom*'s makers Sony for alleged knockoffing of *X-Men*, no legal action materialised between Sony and Disney.

Exactly what happened here may never now emerge; but the Peter Hewitt film of *Zoom* that finally saw release in 2006, and which for a while was the IMDb voters' second-worst movie of all time, has gone to impressive lengths to strike out everything from the book that *Sky High* reproduced, including the Academy, the parents, and indeed pretty much everything about the character of Zoom (in the book a funny-looking alien midget). Instead, Tim Allen's superhero emeritus is now a reluctant recruit in a military operation based in 'Area 52', where he struggles with Chevy Chase, Rip Torn, and a gamely goofy Courtney Cox to train a four-strong team of demographically assorted kids in time to face the arrival of Kevin Zegers' supermenace from beyond at the long-postponed climax. Original heroine Summer ('giant nose, too many freckles, and glasses') is squeezed down to a supporting role, recast as 16 and played, like the other teens, by an attractive 23-year-old with a small nose, no glasses and no freckles whatever; and the astonishing trainwreck script feels for all the world like an amateur job from the spec bin, with scenes ending in mid-air and a throughline whose narrative dolly-tracks seem to have been sabotaged with explosives. Even the one funny idea, the superstrong six-year-old in a pink ballerina costume, is marred by the fact that the cute kiddie actress has an impenetrable speech impediment that mangles her lines unintelligibly. How a director of Hewitt's standing ever got attached is a mystery as deep as any about this film's existence. At any rate it's beyond even his powers to save.

All this has interesting resonances with the most spectacular case to date of progression from vanity-publication rags to Hollywood riches, though in this case via bona fide bestsellerdom. In the opportune absence of a Potter or Narnia film, the Christmas fantasy slot found itself targeted instead by the grimly instructive *Eragon*, a film which illuminates its source and genre in ways that considerably exceed its own limited intelligence. One one level, it's faintly depressing that the next target for acquisition after Tolkien and Lewis should be Christopher Paolini's podgy adolescent cobble-up of geriatric

genre tropes; but Paolini's books have a huge teen following which isn't entirely undeserved, for all the laugh-out-loud silly names, interminable map-trudging, and what might kindly be called an extended homage to Anne McCaffrey (whose generosity and support have been important to the books' success). While not in the same league as the greatest of teen-authored fantasy series, Alison Spedding's *A Walk in the Dark*, Paolini's narrative verve and ingenuous recycling still convey a sense of excitement about the genre that at its best can quicken ancient memories of what it felt like to fall in love

with sub-Tolkienian tosh for the very first time; and if it's dispiriting to see a young talent trapped by his own precocity into protractedly trilogising his juvenilia at an age when he's capable of something with a spark of actual imagination, Paolini himself seems happy enough with the gig, and still has plenty of grow-up time ahead.

The film version, however, takes a crueller line on this, its clumping script ruthlessly exposing the novel's narrative and thematic bones in ways that do author and material no favours at all. It's entirely possible to read the novel without once realising that the plot is an unconscious but systematic traceover of *A New Hope*; the film, however, practically issues bingo cards preprinted with the parallels. More seriously still, the film makes starkly obvious from the start what was only subliminally apparent (to me, at least) about the novel's driving theme:

that the girl dragon Saphira, whom our farmboy hero raises from egg, bonds with telepathically, and rides to glory as he becomes a man and a hero, is a transparent allegory of having a fantasy novel on the go instead of a girlfriend. Yet even this is fumbled in the execution, since Eragon himself has now been fatally upgraded *Zoom*-style from 15 (the age at which Paolini drafted the first version of the novel) to 17, and is played by a hearty 18-year-old who looks older still – so that the book's uniquely authentic and compelling grasp of the lonely pre-adult's imaginative yearning is lost in the transference to a figure from a different demographic entirely. Ed Speleers is likeably wooden, but the part actually calls for someone closer to Freddie Highmore. It's not a complete disaster, and is aware that it's dealing with what to the fanbase is a sacred text; but there's scant empathy with the reasons why.

Eragon's principal rival for the festive fantasy throne was the anxiously overbusy **Night at the Museum**, a fairly comprehensive exhibition of things you'd run a mile not to see: a serial-failure dad given one last chance to earn his son's respect ('I don't think Nicky has any room in his heart for more disappointment'); reams of self-help instruction about 'having greatness thrust upon you'; Genghis Khan tamed, in a scene played only half for laughs, by the modern magic of counselling. ('You want to rip things, and I think it's maybe because somebody ripped you: they ripped the love right out of you.') But none of these sink the film, whose problems lie more in its actual museology. Milan Trenc's picture-book *The Night at the Museum* used a real setting, the Museum of Natural History in NYC, whose dinosaur collection was the exclusive focus of the single night's plot. In the very loose film adaptation, all but one of the dinosaurs have all gone, and though the museum still calls itself the 'American Museum of Natural History', it supplements its population of stuffed animals with a bizarrely random collection of model dioramas, wax figures, and anthropological curios, and moves the whole focus from natural history to human. The well-known delicacies of that branch of curatorship are left unexplored; one might at least expect the ancient Egyptian plot engine to be triumphantly repatriated at the climax to break the spell, but nothing like that is even allowed to be thought of.

As if all this weren't incoherent enough, the film's museum, which far from being tired and rundown actually looks really spiffy and fun, is haemorrhaging punters because it can't compete with more animated forms of learning media tooled to short and intolerant attention spans, such as, well, movies. 'Kids today,' we're told, 'don't care about wax figures and stuffed animals' – so that the film's hostage line 'Everything Comes to Life!' is a rather back-handed claim that merely underlines what a movie museum can do that a real one can't, something brought home in the depressing finale when the museum contents escape for a night on the town and visitor numbers duly spike the following day. Yet the real value of museums as an educational resource is precisely that they *don't* come to life; they're spaces in which visitors wander at their own pace, not someone else's, and in which the



residue of the past and the natural world is frozen for contemplation at leisure. But nobody's interested in selling that kind of experience. There's a telling moment when Ben Stiller's hero is instructed to 'read some books, brush up on your history'. But does he go to a library? Not a bit of it. He does a bit of reading on the floor of an unnaturally patient bookshop, but otherwise gets his infodumps from Google and from stalking the museum's tour guide.

The magic of museums and their mysterious stone god-heads is also the perfunctory plot propellant of **It's a Boy-Girl Thing**, a fairly excruciating but undeniably well-planned assault on the last and least comfortable body-swap scenario, between high school seniors of competing sexes. The twentysomething leads (Samaire Armstrong and *Zoom*'s Kevin Zegers) would be adequate if only they were remotely believable as teens; but perhaps because it's a British-made, Canadian-shot impersonation of America, it's at least willing to go close to some knuckles more conventionally-pedigreed high school comedies prefer not to brush. Though notionally a comedy of gender, it soon becomes clear that it's using this touchiest of social binaries to talk more frankly than teen comedies normally allow about the still less speakable divisions of race, education, and above all class. Her parents are posh, her sights set on Yale; he's a blue-collar jock whose mom is (for some reason) Sharon Osbourne and whose best hope is a football scholarship to a third-rank college. Her cold bitch mom dismisses the working class: 'He's stupid, he's trouble, and he's a loser, and there's nothing you can do to change that. It's basic genetics.' And in a moment of clarity, he recognises the small, hard nucleus of uncomfortable truth in this: 'What we don't get is a great job, an apartment in the city, and a Yale education.' From this point, however, the film takes grateful relief in full-on fairytale mode, as each miraculously passes the test on which the other's future depends, thanks to his reliance on black urban music to fortify his insecure white masculinity, and her improbable flair for touchdowns. If it's still not a very enjoyable experience, at least much of the discomfort comes from the acute anticipation of genuinely ghastly ordeals of agecoming that are bad enough in the right body, so that the very predictability of the key plot points and set pieces becomes part of the general squirm.



No such discomfort, at least, over time-paradox thriller **Déjà Vu**, which sees Denzel Washington's forensic bombsquadder racing to solve, and ultimately to prevent, a massive terror attack on New Orleans. (In the event the production was hit not by a whopping big movie explosion but by Katrina, footage from which has been rather awkwardly dropped in – not a little ironically, given that it's the one disaster that absolutely everybody saw coming.) As a Tony Scott film, this has its share of vapid pyrotechnics; the initial explosion is even bigger than you know it's going to be, there's a completely daft dual-timeline car chase with intertemporal driving goggles invented for the purpose, and the big story meetings with the explanation dudes is illustrated by Zapruderizing the plot on a colossal high-res screen through which Denzel chucks a chair by way of punctuation. But what's striking is how mainstream this kind of nonlinear storytelling has become since the pioneer days of *La Jetée*, of which this is essentially another remake, and how comfortable audiences have now grown

with the device. Last year's *The Lake House* gave us time-twisted narrative in a chickflick, and *Prisoner of Azkaban* had already done one for kids, so that there's now a warm glow of familiarity in *Déjà Vu*'s telling of its story: the careful collage of establishing detail in the opening shots of the innocents about to get smithereened the moment the credits stop; the timestamped paradox clues planted throughout the investigation; the third-act convergence of certainties as we finally get to walk through the clues one by one along the timeline leading up to zero hour. Written by Terry Rossio in a different teaming from his usual and bankable partnership with Ted Elliott, it leaves a number of loose ends untied – particularly the eerie hints dropped by the Jim Caviezel character – that suggest someone has gone back in time and fiddled with the ending as originally conceived. But it could all have been a lot worse; I came out past a quartet of teenage girls, all black, enthusiastically re-explaining the plot to one another in the queue for the ladies. The end of *The Fountain* was met only with nervous giggles. **Nick Lowe**

Sixty Days and Counting

Kim Stanley Robinson • Voyager, 512pp, £17.99 hb

The collision of the present and the future, of the *already is* and the *could be*, is a difficult moment to capture. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital* trilogy, comprising *Forty Signs of Rain*, *Fifty Degrees Below* and his newest novel *Sixty Days and Counting*, manages to do so in a manner that is in every way unexpected. They make you smile when you'd expect them to be bleak and powerful at the peripheries as well as the core; and *Sixty Days and Counting* is a thoroughly satisfying finish to a series that successfully captures the *now* and the *next*. Robinson's story is not a grim glimpse of the coming apocalypse, but a refreshingly positive, human story of how the mundane details of our everyday lives accrete to create a narrative much larger than those lives.

The three novels tell a single story, and should be read as such. Robinson offers readers science fiction as social realism to tell how science actually works in the United States and the world at large in this moment. In the first two novels of the series, we meet Charlie and Anna Quibler and Frank Vanderwal as well as their friends and families. Anna Quibler is a cog in the National Science Foundation, while Charlie is a science advisor to Phil Chase, a well-placed senator. Frank Vanderwahl is a scientist on leave from UCSD, working with Anna in the capital. *Forty Signs of Rain* took readers through events that bring the problems of global climate change into the lives of its characters, and *Fifty Degrees Below* sees Chase elected President as the US population and government begins to realise that radical action will be required to avert global catastrophe. *Sixty Days and Counting* follows the first sixty days of Chase's Presidency and beyond, as the Quiblers try to sort out their home life, Frank his love life and the world this little problem concerning a forthcoming species extinction event. Of the human race.

It is the human that's the important aspect here. In *Sixty Days and Counting*, Robinson's story focuses on the characters and the effects of their individual actions as part of the enormous and creaking technology that the United States calls the Federal Government. The novel does everything a great science fiction novel

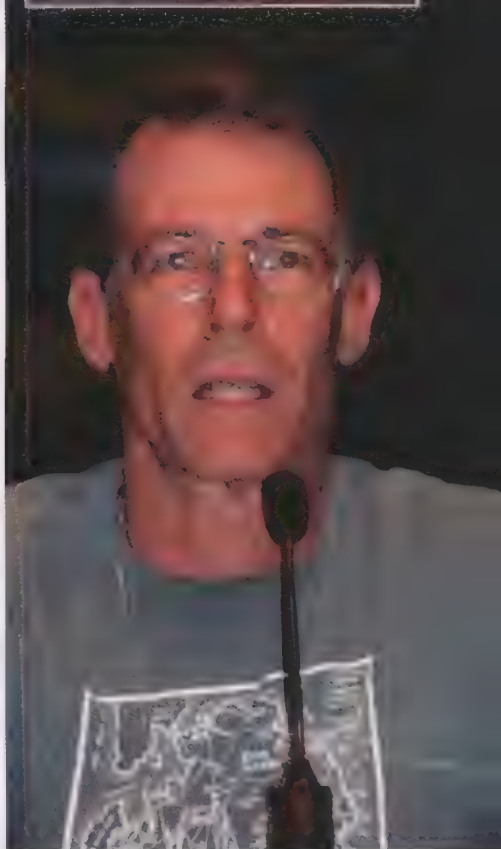
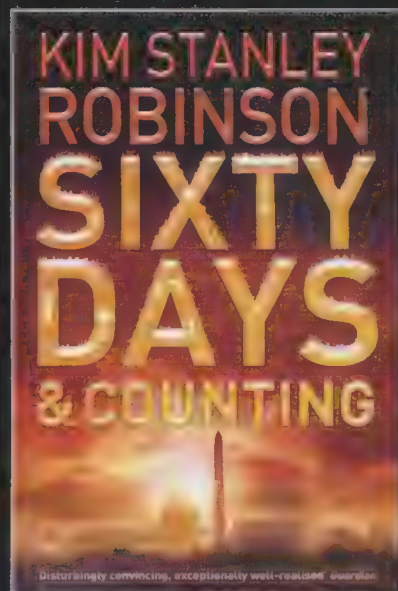
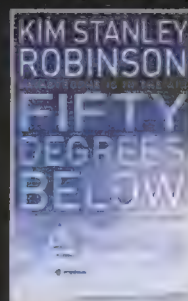
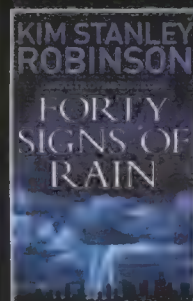
should do, but in a very unconventional manner. On one hand, the book does read like a low-key, current day domestic comedy. But the nuts and bolts of that comedy are no less than *The End Of The World As We Know It*, both environmentally and politically.

Robinson works on a grand canvas through specific details. Readers watch Charlie Quibler play Mr Mom until duty calls from a power no less than that of President Phil Chase. Frank Vanderwal's seriously odd love life involves a woman implicated in Presidential election fraud. The Quiblers and Vanderwal engage in bureaucratic infighting to get real science done to avert global catastrophe. Robinson offers passionate rants and inspired heights of invention that are both entertaining and thought-provoking.

As science fiction, *Sixty Days and Counting* and the entire *Science in the Capital* trilogy operate in a subtle and subversive manner. Robinson is gritty and realistic in portraying the day-to-day practice of science, but within these boundaries he tosses off speculative notions that create a sense of wonder about the here and now. He explores our understanding of humans as social animals, small-scale cutting-edge genetic engineering and huge-scale environmental amelioration, all with equal aplomb and all grounded in scenes about everyday life.

Robinson does not confine his speculations to the world of hard science either and this is his greatest strength. He's equally adept at envisioning the political and social changes that will be required to avert the climate changes his characters foresee. In a US government shot through with black-budget covert operations, Robinson's characters find themselves under surveillance by ill-intentioned representatives of an economic regime that cannot be allowed to continue if humanity itself is to survive. The author creates tension and evokes uneasy humour as Vanderwal, Chase and the Quiblers attempt to simply live their lives and do their jobs.

Sixty Days and Counting is something of a paradox. Robinson engages in fantastic and head-spinning speculation while telling a very realistic and rather funny story about characters we really like. He shows the world going to hell in a handbasket and yet there's an aura of almost sunny positivism. There are plenty of reasons to worry, but there are even more possibilities for change.



Forty Signs of Rain, Fifty Degrees Below, and Sixty Days and Counting really form a single story. Do you feel as if they comprise a large single novel, published in serial form? Did you contemplate publishing them as a single work?

The three volumes do form a single story, which I call *Science in the Capital*. I always planned to publish them in three volumes, in the usual fashion of trilogies, because it seemed to me that together they would be too long to publish in a single volume. Now that I have seen the three Mars books published in one volume in France (and French translations run about 20% longer than English originals), I have learned otherwise. I've heard a little talk about putting out an omnibus volume eventually. That could be good.

Our real-life understandings and perceptions of global climate change, a key topic in these novels, changed significantly during the publication of the three books. How did this inform and alter the writing process?

I began writing the first book in late 2001, and at that point 'abrupt climate change' was a new concept, and the whole issue of global warming was much less emphasised than it is now. Some things I wrote about in an explanatory way (like FEMA, or carbon sequestration) are now well-known, and events are accelerating such that my various physical predictions are in some cases coming true (flooded coastal city, open-water Arctic Ocean, and most recently the inundation of an inhabited island in the Sundarbans). This was happening while I wrote the books, and that allowed me, or forced me, to accelerate the pace of events in my narrative, and to focus in the third volume on potential solutions of all kinds, some of them practical and ready to hand, others impractical or even extremely dangerous. I also shifted my emphasis from the physical to the social, and tried to make it clearer than ever that everything is connected here, that global warming connects to all our habits and institutions, such that addressing the climate problem forces us to confront our cruelly stupid economic system. Our social world will have to become more just if we are to avoid wrecking the biosphere. This injects a new urgency into old problems never faced, and so, in an accelerando typical of the end of many science fiction novels, I tried to depict that happening. It made for a good finale I think.

There's lots of great historical in the middle of some grim circumstances, and a close look at middle class American lives in a time of change.

Whenever humans try to do something good, it becomes a comedy of errors. It may be black comedy but it can be pretty funny. So I wanted to write a domestic comedy about global warming, it sounds odd but it's true. And it was important to ground the whole project in the daily lives of ordinary people, not only because that's what novels do, but because the problem itself concerns how ordinary Americans choose to live. So if reacting to the destruction of the biosphere causes people in the West to live saner, healthier, and happier lives, this would be ironic, but in a good way. In other words, altering current lifestyles may not be exactly a huge sacrifice, given how unhealthy and unhappy these lifestyles make us. Making changes may not be a matter of puritan renunciation, but rather a return to the real world and to some saner existence. That's the utopian aspect of these novels I suppose.

Politics and the machinations of the Federal Government of the United States play a key role in this novel. Could you comment on how the sheer size and complexity of the government informs some of the science fictional speculation in the novels?

Yes, it is a huge system, and one aspect of the plot involves describing how it might be possible to design an overarching 'mission architecture' that would coordinate the many parts of the system to accomplish projects larger than usually contemplated, in ways that the uncoordinated 'free market' never could. The novels try to remind people that democratic governments are 'of the people, by the people, and for the people', and need to be conceptualised as such, and as really big masses of capital, freed up from capitalism's profit imperative and made available for general human good. It's quite an achievement if you think of it in that way, and an alternate view to the hugely destructive 'starve the beast' attitude unleashed on government by capitalism since the Reagan counter-revolution.

Where will your voyage next?

I'm writing a science fiction novel about Galileo. Another comedy.

Review and interview by Rick Kleffel

The Day Watch

Sergei Lukyanenko • Heinemann, 496pp, £11.99 pb



The world of Sergei Lukyanenko's *Night Watch* trilogy is a strange one, using both new and old worlds in a strangely innovative way. *Day Watch*, part two of the

sequence, is divided into three sections, each thematically linking together.

The first section relates the doomed love story of Alisa, a Dark Witch, and Igor, a Light Mage, who are sent to a resort to restore themselves after a fierce battle in Moscow. The ensuing duel based on love and ultimately death sets up the moral ground for the novel but also gives an indication of the amorality of the secret societies.

The second covers the coming of Vitaly, a mirror sent by the Inquisition to restore the balance between Light and Dark, which expands the worlds of the book in terms of clans and geographically, setting up the change of location in third and final section, which binds the plot lines together and begins to explain the various threads from the first book and the novellas in this volume. In the final novella the Inquisition launches a trial that ties up the plot lines in this book but also reveals the larger story of its world.

Lukyanenko develops his secret societies, making them a driving force in the world, working insidiously to make small changes. The author places himself firmly in the tradition of using literature to comment on the world, particularly post-Soviet Russia, and the measures he feels are necessary to renew the ailing world.

Rather than being a filler waiting for the conclusion, this second book reveals the larger picture and transforms the story into something marvellous. All the protagonists are shown to be at the mercy of larger and more powerful forces for change, often just struggling to survive. It's not a world where options are easy but one which needs people to begin to define the real world and be brave enough to make choices and accept the consequences. **Iain Emsley**

The Execution Channel

Ken MacLeod • Orbit, 320pp, £17.99 hb

The Execution Channel is a far cry from the space opera work MacLeod is best known for. Instead, we have a story set in an alternate future that is a mere blink of the temporal eye from the time we inhabit right now. The 'War on Terror' continues apace in the oil-rich countries of the Middle and Far East. Between the charged political poles of the US and Europe, Britain is stretched on the rack of divided loyalties – stretched to breaking point. The arrival of a clandestine technology that may make fossil fuels redundant stirs these already muddy waters into a vortex of confusion and disinformation, and the world teeters on the brink of outright war.

The Execution Channel resembles an espionage thriller more than anything else, though there's none of the heroic hubris and glorification that that genre often displays. Instead, we get an unflinchingly realistic look at the world of covert operations and government secrets

The seediness and paranoia of a world where governments hide the truth as a matter of routine is portrayed effortlessly

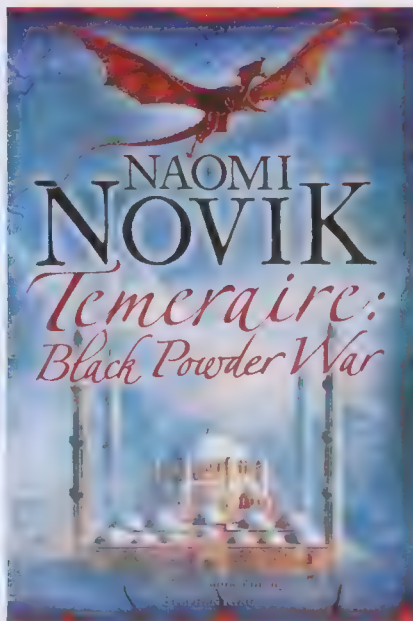
– all the characters are equally in the dark as to what is really happening. The seediness and paranoia of a world where governments hide the truth as a matter of routine is portrayed effortlessly. Cover-blown spies, peace protesters, conspiracy-theorist bloggers and professional disinformation disseminators all work in a vacuum of hard reliable facts, all ignorant of the true agendas they're supporting.

Of course, it's a science fiction novel, too – but MacLeod's deployment of the genre's tropes and tricks is subtle. Right from the start, the experienced genre reader is waiting to be ambushed by the sf theme. Along the way there are numerous false leads and red herrings for characters and reader alike, a kind of literary shell game that fascinates and confounds in equal measure until the shock conclusion. The warts-and-all political theme and a narrative that pushes at the boundaries of what is traditionally described as sf both combine to ensure that no reader could fail to have an opinion on it. That it is a tense, compelling story with vivid characters and a politico-philosophical punch only adds to its appeal. **Paul Raven**

Temeraire: Black Powder War

Naomi Novik • Voyager, 341pp, £14.99 hb

Temeraire: Black Powder War marks the third appearance of Captain Laurence and his dragon Temeraire in Naomi Novik's series of alternate-history Napoleonic War adventures. In Book Two, *Temeraire: Throne of Jade*, Laurence and Temeraire fought for the right to stay together against the will of the Chinese Empire. Now freed from that dispute, they're sent on a mission across Asia to claim three Turkish dragon eggs for the British government. On their way, they face setbacks in the form of sandstorms, political treachery and – in



Novik's series has already been optioned by film producer Peter Jackson, perhaps the only filmmaker who could be trusted by fans to handle the mixture of necessary special effects and true emotional intensity of these books

the riveting final section of the book – the bloody battlefields of Germany and Poland.

The first third of the book is a beautifully written travelogue, full of interest and local colour, but slightly lacking in narrative drive. Once they arrive in Istanbul, however, the tension ratchets up, and the final third of the novel, in which Temeraire and Laurence find themselves at the centre of the European battlefields, is nail-bitingly exciting. Novik throws herself into Napoleonic military history with an irresistible exuberance, much like the irrepressible Temeraire himself. The battles themselves are thrillingly written, but one of the deepest pleasures of this book for any

lover of history is Novik's deft meshing of real Napoleonic history with the changed tactics and results of dragon warfare. Novik does a beautiful job of imagining how the different countries would use their dragons' skills to distinctly different effect...especially when an unexpected and dangerous new commander rises to prominence in Napoleon's own army.

Another great joy in these books is the development of Laurence and Temeraire's own relationship. They fought in the second book to stay together, but now that they're on their way back home, they discover a painful conflict in their own goals. Having witnessed the freedoms of dragons in China, Temeraire is determined to liberate his brethren in England, and



Laurence finds himself torn between loyalties to dragon and country. Their halting attempts at negotiation ring painfully true and hint at fascinating developments in upcoming books.

Novik's series has already been optioned by filmmaker Peter Jackson, perhaps the only filmmaker who could be trusted by fans to handle the mixture of necessary special effects and true emotional intensity of these books. I can't wait to see what promises to be an exceptional series of movies; and I can't wait to read the fourth book and see where the next adventures of Laurence and Temeraire will go.

Stephanie Burgis

Rollback

Robert J. Sawyer • Tor, 320pp, \$24.95 hb

Maybe the title's the problem. *Rollback* is such a lumpen, euphemising, middle-management kind of word that you half-expect to open the book and find a PowerPoint presentation. It's not quite that bad. The premise of *Rollback* is that in 2009, an alien transmission from Sigma Draconis was received, and decoded by Dr Sarah Halifax. In 2048, after Earth's reply has gone there and back, an alien response is received. Sarah and her husband Don, now in old age, are offered the rare and hugely costly 'rollback' procedure to make them younger again so that Sarah can help deal with the new alien signal. Unfortunately, the procedure works for Don – whose body is returned to a twentysomething state – but not Sarah.

All of which would be fine as the basis for, say, a middle-of-the-road novelette. Old minds in young bodies are hardly a new trope in sf, and nor is first contact. But stretched out to novel length, *Rollback* feels

The First Contact stuff doesn't advance much beyond Carl Sagan's *Contact* without that book's sense of newness.

desperately slow, lacking in any kind of imaginative concentration or innovation. Don and Sarah's marriage, which needs to be the emotional bedrock of the novel, has none of the intimate emotional interplay one would expect from a sixty-year relationship, and the consequences of the mismatched rollback are predictable, to say the least. Similarly, the First Contact stuff doesn't advance much beyond Carl Sagan's *Contact* (an acknowledged influence here), without that book's sense of newness. Sawyer's style is flat – pedestrian without rising to the heights of, say, David Marusek's piercing journalistic directness. (Picking a sentence at random: "Don remembered wondering whether time would pass quickly or slowly for him now that he was young again." (290))

I don't want to be too harsh. The book is perfectly readable – a damn sight more than many books I've read lately – but it doesn't say anything about human nature, or about youth and old age, or about how we might respond to alien contact, that I hadn't heard before. *Rollback* is never less than competent, and never more. **Graham Sleight**

No Dominion

Charlie Huston • Del Rey, 272pp, \$13.95 hb

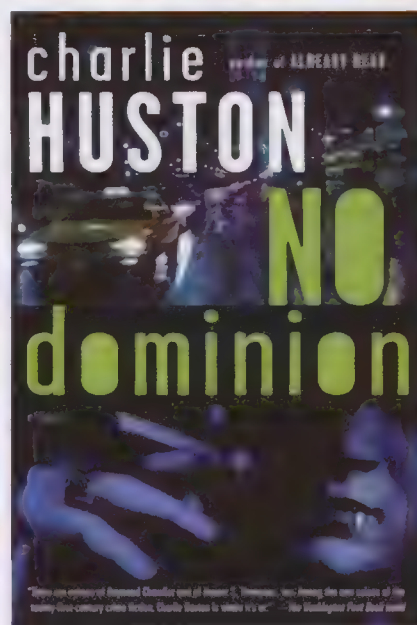
Huston's *Already Dead* was a viciously pleasing contrast to vampire romance novels coyly ducking bloodier implications. A vivid urban nightmare, it offered no way out of a Manhattan underworld dominated by undead gangs. Bleakly realistic vampyre Joe Pitt's only hope of survival was making himself useful to the most powerful while giving them no reason to wipe him out. But given the completeness of his first novel, can Huston avoid merely retreading the same mean streets?

Happily *No Dominion* stays true to that claustrophobic intensity while expanding it with both logic and innovation. Constraints stimulate writerly creativity throughout. How does a vampire cross a sunny city without a car with tinted windows when enforcers constantly ride the subway to guard each faction's turf? Joe's problem-solving is merely one thread constantly anchoring this fiction to reality. Laconic dialogue and wry observation create convincing characters while descriptions of places and crowds are razor-sharp without a wasted or superfluous word. Thankfully the blackest of humour still lightens a world where no compromise undercuts the challenge of this singular vision.

Stark understatement enhances the intensity of their relationship, a sharp corrective to novels where ill-considered erotica slows the story, blunting thrills or sitting uneasily with graphic violence. Here bloodshed is deployed for calculated effect not just splashed around the fast-moving, gripping plot.

Someone's peddling an addictive high for vampyres, normally unable to blunt their pain with drugs or alcohol, both neutralised by the Vyrus. The major players want answers. After centuries amassing money and power in the shadows, the Coalition don't want to be unmasked. The Society aspire to the reintegration of vryally infected individuals into society but only on their own terms. Joe's a sleuth both groups can trust, as he owes no allegiance to either, and disposable, as neither owes any loyalty to him. As the ostensibly simple plot unfolds with satisfying intricacy, Joe follows the trail to Harlem where DJ Grave Digga rules the vampyres of the Hood. He finds race-hate woven into deadly vampyre politics and a wildcard faction preferring open war to armed truce. Joe's survival depends on finding a solution that'll satisfy everyone. **Juliet McKenna**

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Solaris Book of New Science Fiction

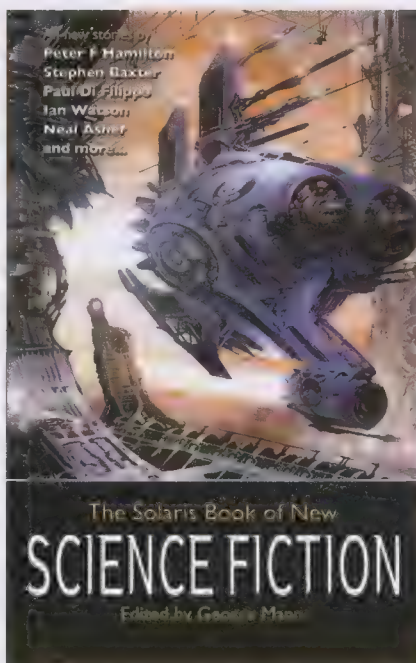
George Mann, ed - Solaris, 416pp, £7.99 pb

An anthology of original stories from a new imprint inevitably stands as a harbinger of what we might expect from that publisher, particularly as the first and last stories are by authors featured on the initial list from Solaris. It doesn't help, therefore, that 'In His Sights' by Jeffrey Thomas, set in the 'Punktown' location of his forthcoming novel, is such a sadly old-fashioned affair. It is a story about the effects of war, but the jungle warfare, the tactics used, even the alien names are a direct borrowing from the Vietnam War. Moreover the central idea is that sweet little fallacy of sixties comic books: that mutation means everyone acquiring their own unique super power. It is possible that forty years ago this story would have seemed right on the button; but an awful lot has happened since then.

Closing the book is 'The Farewell Party' by Eric Brown, which reads like the final part of his Kéthani Sequence. These stories have been among the best things that Brown has written, but this episode seems to be running out of steam, and it highlights the one thing that has been missing throughout the sequence, the failure to let us follow the story beyond Earth. This story clearly demanded that final step, and Brown's hesitation is ultimately what lets down what is still one of the better stories in this collection.

In between, Mann has rounded up the usual suspects, too many of them with below-par stories that show all the hallmarks of having been disinterred from long-forgotten bottom drawers. I'll only name-and-shame Mike Resnick and David Gerrold, whose collaboration, 'Jellyfish', starts as a clumsy satire on Kurt Vonnegut, turns into an even clumsier satire on the old-guard of sf writers (and since all too obvious avatars of Resnick and Gerrold appear here, we know the attack isn't meant to be taken seriously), and ends up as simply one of the most embarrassingly bad stories you're likely to encounter in a long time.

I also notice a reluctance to describe. Neal Asher's 'Bioship', for instance, is crammed full of the strange, but there isn't a single word of description anywhere in the story, which means it is impossible to get any clear picture of what these strangenesses might actually be. Simon Ings also eschews



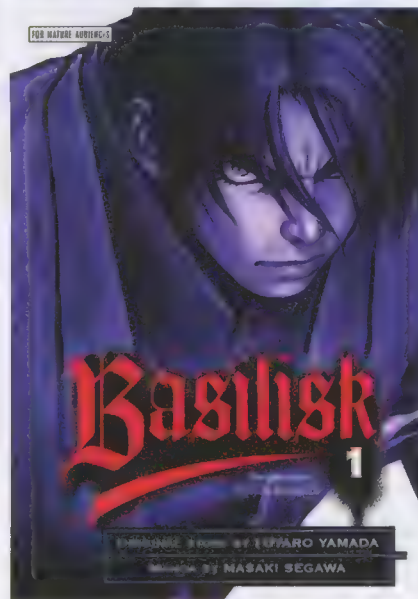
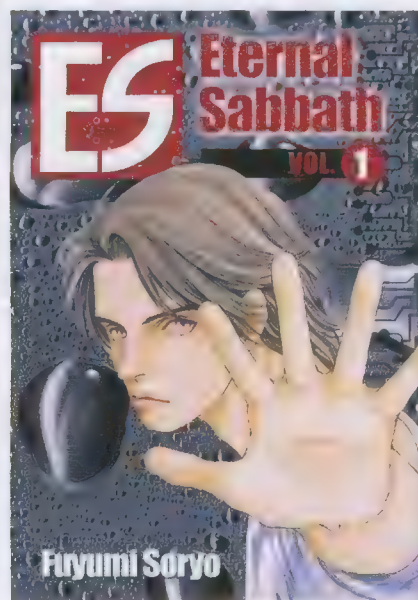
description in 'The Wedding Party', but in this instance it is a deliberate effect, forcing us to imagine for ourselves the horrors in this tale of all too human monstrosity.

There are better stories here. 'C-Rock City' by the ever-reliable Jay Lake and Greg van Eekhout presents an intriguing space future that cries out to be further developed. 'Zora and the Land Ethic Nomads' by Mary Turzillo has too little story for its well-constructed Martian setting but is still a solid, readable story, as are 'The Accord' by Keith Brooke and 'Third Person' by Tony Ballantyne. But alongside the Brown the best pieces here are 'Last Contact' in which Stephen Baxter again destroys the universe but at least demonstrates his increasing ability to handle the human scale beside the epic; and 'Cages' by Ian Watson which, like just about every Ian Watson story, shoots off in too many directions at once, but which still comes loaded with as many startling, original and intriguing ideas as the whole of the rest of this collection put together.

If this collection really is a true mirror of the new imprint, then we can expect just a few tantalising glimmers of gold amid an awful lot of tired old dross. **Paul Kincaid**

Solaris Books is the new science fiction, fantasy and dark fantasy imprint from BL Publishing. "The ethos of Solaris is to publish a mix of new and traditional science fiction and fantasy books for fans of these genres. It also aims to fill the ever-widening gap that has appeared between the large mass-market publishers and the small genre press in the American and British scene." www.solarisbooks.com

The two intriguing new series *ES: Eternal Sabbath* and *Basilisk* are chalk and cheese: *ES* develops a science-fictional theme involving genetic engineering and psionic abilities, whereas *Basilisk* is a classic ninja tale set in the seventeenth century that draws on Japanese folklore for its inspiration. Both series have adult protagonists (as opposed to teenagers) which comes as something of a change for this reviewer, in that so many recent titles on Del Rey's list deal only with high school or college relationships and display no obvious genre characteristics.



MANGAZONE: MANGA FOR GROWN-UPS SARAH ASH

"These are the shards of my consciousness. Once more it will be one again and a new persona awakens. But no one knows of my existence, I am nameless. If I were to give myself a name...yes, I would call myself ES." Thus begins **ES: Eternal Sabbath** by Fuyumi Soryo, better known here for her engaging non-genre shojo series *Mars*. On the strength of the first two volumes of this new series, she is equally adept at developing an intriguing science-fictional theme. We follow ES, a good-looking young man, as he wanders Tokyo, entering the minds of the people he encounters, discovering their secrets and even altering their memories, so that strangers are convinced they know him and welcome him as a long-lost friend or family member. This parasitical existence is his only means of survival but is not, Soryo tells us, done out of malice. "He merely amuses himself with the confusion and harmony in that invisible world known as the human mind." By the time he encounters Dr Mine Kujyou, a neurological specialist, he has assumed the identity of Ryousouke Akiba.

Dr Kujyou is dedicated to her work as a researcher at Touhou University, perhaps a little too dedicated. Not long after we meet her, she is off to an *omiai*, or matchmaking service (her tenth that year!) at which – out of nerves, or habit – she proceeds to rattle off scientific facts instead of making pleasant small talk, scaring off yet another prospective suitor. Then Mine and her friend Kimiko witness a horrific murder in broad daylight. Mine, trained to evaluate and observe, notices a close bystander who reacts in an abnormally detached way to the crime. "Don't you find it strange that someone can actually walk by someone who is being murdered and act as if nothing is wrong?" she asks Kimiko. Not long afterwards, she finds Ryosouke Akiba at the university. Fascinated, against her better judgement, she makes contact with him. It seems that she, unlike the majority of human beings, is not susceptible to his mind-bending powers. "I can barely manipulate you, and if I try to shake you, it doesn't disturb you. Honestly, you're difficult to deal with." Thus begins an unusual relationship between two rather solitary and 'different' individuals.

The sudden arrival of Sakaki, an immunology researcher, leads to the revelation of Akiba's true identity. He is a genetically engineered human being, created

with the Eternal Sabbath gene, and his given name is Shuro: "Like the palm leaf in the Bible," Sakaki tells Mine. "In Christianity during penitence, the believer is covered in the ashes of palm leaves. Perhaps we named him that because we felt guilty for playing God." Sakaki then reveals that they also created a clone of Shuro, called Isaac. "Just like his namesake, Isaac was created so that we could sacrifice his life." Unfortunately, Isaac has escaped from the laboratory, wreaking havoc. Sakaki begs Mine to help him track Isaac down and destroy him. And as events unfold, it soon becomes apparent just how dangerous an opponent the child Isaac is. Will Shuro put aside his indifference to human beings and help Mine and Sakaki? Or will he just shrug and disappear? With well-drawn (in both senses!) characters and subtle, sympathetic touches of humour to lighten the darker episodes, *ES* sets up a convincing dilemma and leaves the reader eager to find out how it will be resolved.

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If the Montagues and the Capulets had been warring ninja clans, would Romeo and Juliet's doomed love affair have turned out any differently? **Basilisk** takes us back to Year 19 of the Keicho Era (1610) and introduces the Iga and the Kouga clans, sworn enemies for hundreds of years. By order of Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa, ten ninjas from each clan must fight to the death to determine who will be the next Shogun. The surviving clan will then rule for the next thousand years unopposed. This will come as shattering news to young Oboro of the Iga clan and Gennosuke of the Kouga clan, who are in love and planning to marry. The plight of these star-crossed lovers, whose clans are now pitted against each other by the Shogun's cruel decree, underpins this dark and death-laden tale. Masaki Segawa's manga, based on the novel *The Kouga Ninja Scrolls* by the late Futaro Yamada, is not for the fainthearted.

A tale of ninjas inevitably means the revelation of extraordinary fighting powers and the warriors of the two clans possess some of the most bizarre and grotesque powers imaginable. In the opening duel staged before the Shogun, Yashamaru of the Iga-Tsubakagure Sect is pitted against Shougen Kazamachi of the Kouga Manjidani Sect. Yashamaru, young and good-looking, fights with lethally fine strings "made from the black hairs of a human woman...coated

with secret oil rendered from a wild beast's blubber." Kazamachi, hump-backed and spindle-legged like a giant poisonous spider, immobilizes his opponents with his glue-like phlegm. Not all the ninjas who exercise secret powers are hideous: Akeginu, a young and attractive woman of the Iga clan, exudes a poisonous mist of blood from her pores to disable her opponents. And even the sweet-natured Oboro, destined to rule the Iga clan, has devastating eyes; she can disable any ninja just by looking at them.

As well as convincingly portraying extraordinary ninja powers, Segawa is also capable of conveying moments of supreme yet touching dramatic irony. When the two wizened clan leaders face each other in a gruesome and macabre duels, he inserts a poignant reminder of their own doomed love, years ago. Is this a foreshadowing of the grim fate that awaits young Gennosuke and Oboro? Can they possibly defeat the insurmountable odds that the Shogun's cruel decree has stacked against them?

The briefest glance at the artwork in *Basilisk* reveals a dark, claustrophobic view of early seventeenth century Japan. The striking pictures are clotted with shadows, the black of the ink echoing the blackness at the heart of the story, drawing the reader deeper into the gloom. Even the chapters are called 'Kill Number 1', 'Kill Number 2', and by the end of Volume One, the kills have already reached six! There can be no real winners in this bitter war of attrition and it will be fascinating to discover if he can sustain the reader's sympathy for Oboro and Gennosuke's plight amidst the devious scheming and the bloodshed.

Basilisk has been made into an anime series, affording fans the unique pleasure of comparing and contrasting the two versions. The original novel was published in English by Del Rey in December and there is also a live action film *Shinobi Heart Under Blade* on the way! Of course, a manga can differ considerably from the anime it's based on and vice versa. If a manga is still being written weekly or monthly at the time the anime is made, the story continues far beyond the 'end' of the TV series (as in *Fruits Basket*, *GetBackers* or *Loveless*). It's otaku heaven!

Basilisk: Del Rey Kodansha/Tanoshimi (randomhouse.co.uk/tanoshimi). Translated & adapted by David Ury • *ES*: Del Rey Kodansha. Translated by Akira Tsubasa.

The Collected Ed Gorman (1: Out There in the Darkness/2: The Moving Coffin)

Ed Gorman • PS Publishing, 402pp/396pp, £75 deluxe hb, £25 hb

'Moira shot him once in the side and then raised the gun and shot him once on top of the head. His hair flew off, a bloody black coil of curls affixed to the wall by pieces of sticky flesh and bone...'

Frankly, you can't say that you haven't been warned: this from 'The Old Ways' (Volume One *Out There in the Darkness*) is a statement, if ever there was one, that the series of worlds which you are about to enter may contain matters of which some people would sooner remain ignorant. Fine. But wait. Here's the punchline: 'The funny thing was, he kept right on going...' Funny-strange or ha-ha funny, you'll make up your minds, out of context (here) or inside-context (in the gut of the first of these remarkable collections).

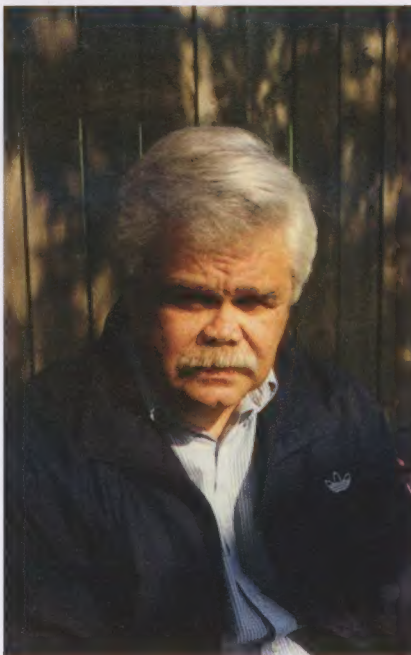
Either way, we step from gullibility into outright stupidity if we deny that Gorman has the skill to manipulate a mood, bust a genre's gate (both volumes are principally crime and mystery), or successfully crash two styles – as *Darkness* and Volume 2, *The Moving Coffin*, effortlessly exhibit.

That these are but the first two collections of a 'multi-volume set' tells the reader everything he needs to know about Gorman's generosity as a writer. They're packed. Nearly forty stories across two volumes and we sense that he's yet to break a sweat. Retrospectively, if nothing else then, let us help him at least *acknowledge* that sweat.

Some of these stories strike a nerve and some of them strike a chord. From one of the latter, in my opinion: 'Here we sat in an office filled with murderers, rapists, perverts, and armed-robbery types, and Mr DeConcini managed to be relentlessly friendly, like a campaigning politician on speed.' Replace that *office* with a *classroom* and that's not too far from my own day job – the point being that all human experience is in here, in this 800 pages: *resonating*.

Been cheated on? Try 'Famous Blue Raincoat'. See if it stings, and see about that outcome – let's not forget Gorman's gift for twists and turns. Known cancer in any shape, form or connection? 'Riff' is the one for you, in terms of recognition, temple-to-temple thuds of horror – and fear.

Perhaps it all sounds cruel. Well, perhaps. But perhaps, equally, I convinced



you at the outset that many districts in Gorman's worlds *are* cruel. Plenty of the characters are beastly and they make brutish, throwaway utterances. Again, from 'Riff': 'I sort of knew Charlie wasn't going to hang on much longer... His wife is a weeper.' It doesn't matter too much that a paragraph has been plucked from between those two sentences: the weighty cumulative effect, so early on in the tale, suggested that I wasn't going to enjoy this narrator guy's company too much.

With Gorman, all early perceptions can be deceiving. But the occasional spit-globs of humour in these worlds of sadness and rage remain constant; remain pure as the occasional line that summons up all three of these emotions – humour, sadness and rage – and demands of them, as though they were children in a yard, that they must play together or else.

'Not even the handsome Doctor Connery had suspected anything,' Gorman writes in 'Mother Darkness'. 'He'd just assumed that the other two girls had died from crib death.' But *what* an assumption. Humour + sadness + rage = horror? It's a thought; but not one for us, not for now. Instead, enjoy a master's perspiration as he ponders the same gritty conundrum.

David Mathew

Glasshouse

Charles Stross • Orbit, 388pp, £6.99 pb

Readers of Stross's previous novels will know what to expect in his latest hard sf novel. Already establishing himself as one of the most intelligent and insightful writers of science fiction, *Glasshouse* sets out to reinforce that opinion.

It loosely follows on from his previous book *Accelerando* (it's not necessary to have read *Accelerando* first) and is set in a future human society far evolved technologically from our own. Virtual republics exist connected by interstellar wormholes which regulate not only transportation, but also essentials such as manufacturing and even human resurrection. With a similar feel to a Richard Morgan's Kovacs novels, people can 'back themselves up' and resurrect themselves after death.

A recent galactic civil conflict, called the Censorships, has led to the evolution of a technology which can erase a person's memory. Combine this erasure with resurrection and any individual is able to

A recent galactic civil conflict has led to the evolution of a technology which can erase a person's memory

alter themselves partially or completely at will. One such individual is Robin – our main protagonist. After going through memory erasure rehabilitation, he is recruited into a special project examining 20th Century society for historical purposes. However, his new home in the 'Glasshouse' is full of secrets, complicating even further when his former memories start to reawaken.

Although this is a thrilling hard sf story with plenty of mystery and tension, it's the way Stross examines 20th Century life through essentially alien eyes that make this such an eye opener. Since Stross creates such a highly evolved race, it is difficult to see how he could even ensure his characters adapt to a society they know nothing about with any kind of plausibility. Not only does Stross manage this, he shows a marvellous insight into the human character while doing it.

At times it feels almost like *Big Brother* or even like the paranoid stories of Philip K. Dick. In fact the criticism of our own society is often so strong, it's hard not to feel a little embarrassed or even backward while reading it. **Kevin Stone**

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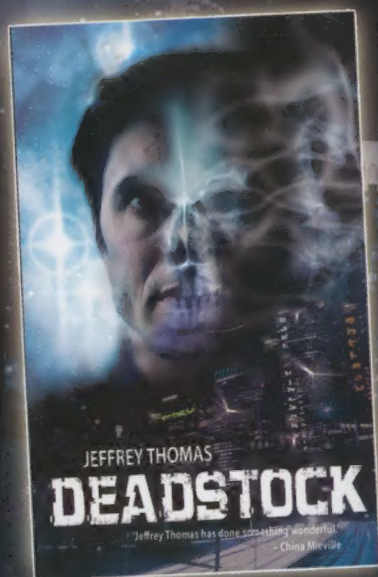
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